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APRIL 30, 2018

THE NEW YORKER



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THE NEW YORKER

APRIL 30, 2018

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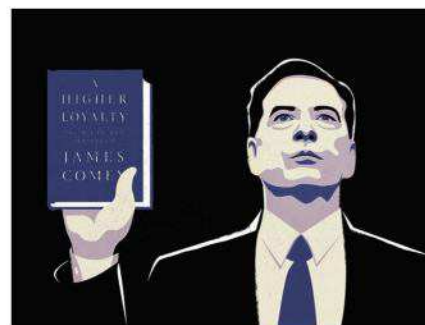
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Alice Gregory on the Amish and Mennonite vacationland of Pinecraft, Florida.



NEW YORKER RADIO HOUR

James Comey talks with David Remnick about Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, and why he stands by his decisions.

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THE MAIL

SOCIAL ANIMALS

It was a pleasure to read Larissa MacFarquhar's article on Andy Clark's theories about embodied intelligence and its relationship with A.I. and neuroscience ("Mind Expander," April 2nd). Clark's theories underemphasize the importance of other people as the primary embodiment of external representation, rather than our own bodies, machines, or objects in the world. The story of Clark's collaborations—with his wife, Chalmers, Friston, and others—is a perfect example of the fact that humans are fundamentally social animals. This insures our survival: organisms working together can do so much more than organisms working apart or in parallel. The greatest challenge for A.I. is not the slow progress in top-down intelligence but the lack of attention to teaming intelligence that would allow the pairing of humans' remarkable predictive powers with A.I.'s superior bottom-up analysis of data.

Alonso Vera

*NASA Ames Research Center
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TEXTURED HISTORY

As D. T. Max indicates in his article on Chinese textile workers in Prato, Italy, the city has seen a proliferation of Chinese clothing workshops ("Made in Italy," April 16th). Prato has a long history as an important textile town, going back to the twelfth century; today's Prato must have seemed a logical place for a contemporary Chinese colony in Europe. A few blocks away from the *centro storico*, on the site of a former mill, is the Textile Museum, which, in 2010, had an exhibit of Tuscan textiles exported to Russia over the centuries. The most magnificent were Orthodox Church ecclesiastical vestments, onto which Russian artisans had sewn jewels, along with a letter from Tsar Boris Godunov himself, saying, "You Tuscans do splendid work and are welcome any time you want to come."

*Nicholas Clifford
Middlebury, Vt.*

TRAUMA AND THE MIND

Like John Seabrook, I once spun out, on the narrow Northern State Parkway, and I, too, have a vivid recollection of the incidental details of those forty-five seconds ("Six Skittles," April 9th). Seabrook explains how stress-induced hormonal responses "can produce extraordinary feats of perception." In the past thirty years, we have begun to understand that our ability to turn perception into memory is greatly heightened by a highly emotional experience. Studies suggest that emotionally charged content enhances not only attention and arousal but also our ability to form stable memories. Accidents can result in a continuous mental replay of a traumatic event, strengthening and extending incidental associations with every replay. Physicians and scientists should look to vivid stories like Seabrook's to help study how the mind's ailments emerge from normal brain functions.

Alex Dranovsky, M.D.

*New York State Psychiatric Institute
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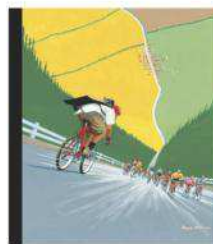
FINDING REALITY

What stood out to me about Joshua Rothman's article on virtual embodiment was just how much of the virtual-reality experience can be inward-looking ("As Real as It Gets," April 2nd). Most of us are familiar with V.R. as being intended for a wholly escapist experience, a plane in which to exercise both freedom and control over oneself. But Rothman's V.R. experience, in which he acts both as Freud and a patient, offers an alternative. It also reveals the fragility of our self-perception and the limitations of attempts to "see another perspective."

Sol Lee

Los Angeles, Calif.

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APRIL 25 – MAY 1, 2018

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



At thirty-one, the actress Condola Rashad has become a force on Broadway. In roles like Juliet (opposite Orlando Bloom's Romeo) and the smiling yet iron-willed daughter in "A Doll's House, Part 2," she's shown a mixture of poise and fortitude echoing that of her mother, Phylicia Rashad. This combination will surely come in handy for her latest character: the warrior, martyr, saint, and troublemaker Joan of Arc, in George Bernard Shaw's "**Saint Joan,**" opening this week at the Samuel J. Friedman Theatre.

PHOTOGRAPH BY PARI DUKOVIC

MOVIES

NOW PLAYING

Borg vs. McEnroe

The icy Swedish tennis champion Björn Borg (played convincingly by Sverrir Gudnason) is the focus of the Danish director Janus Metz's entertaining sports film, a sharply edited drama centered on Borg's historic 1980 Wimbledon match against the American bad boy John McEnroe (Shia LaBeouf). Working with a script by Ronnie Sandahl, Metz poses the argument that Borg's calm demeanor and McEnroe's volatility weren't all that different—Borg just learned to channel his ferocity and drive into a quiet stoicism. This is a thin psychological insight, but the film is stylishly shot, and it zips along through flashbacks of the two players' early years of training and their very different ways of preparing for the big match. LaBeouf delivers a sometimes seething, sometimes combustible performance, and the electrifying re-creation of the finals does the sport of tennis, and competitive fury itself, justice.—*Bruce Diones* (In limited release and on video on demand.)

Godard Mon Amour

Even if this drama, directed by Michel Hazanavicius, weren't based on the true story of the relationship between the filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard and the actress Anne Wiazemsky, in 1967 and 1968, but were merely the story of a pair of fictional artists in political and romantic conflict, it would sink under the weight of its witless vulgarity. Louis Garrel stars as Godard, who took an intense interest in left-wing ideologies and their cinematic implications and, at thirty-seven, was active in the Events of May, 1968, taking a leading role in shutting down the Cannes Film Festival. Stacy Martin plays the twenty-year-old Wiazemsky (on whose memoirs the movie is based) as she attempts to join Godard in his working life but finds herself shunted aside by his newfound political passions and wounded by his temperamental, egotistical outbursts. Hazanavicius skips over the detailed observations and nuanced insights of Wiazemsky's books in favor of parodies of Godard's earlier work, replacing its vast substance, fierce originality, and unsparing intimacy with empty stylistic winks. He also eliminates most of the fascinating, ambitious activities that nourished the couple's romance and their art (such as meetings with John Lennon and Paul McCartney), and reduces his world-historical protagonists to figments of his own thin imagination. In French.—*Richard Brody* (In limited release.)

I Feel Pretty

Amy Schumer works hard to infuse this comedy, built around dated self-help clichés, with a bit of substance and vitality. She stars as Renee Bennett, a frustrated employee of a high-end New York cosmetics company who's relegated to its grim basement annex in Chinatown. She's unhappy with her face, her body, and her life; seeking change in a spin class, she falls off a bike, bumps her head, and awakens with boundless confidence in her beauty and her abilities. Suddenly frank and assertive, she chats up a shy young man (Rory Scovel), who becomes her boyfriend; talks herself into a job at the company's glamorous midtown headquarters; and is soon propelled into a prominent position representing the firm's new low-priced line. She also becomes an

arrogant jerk who alienates her best friends (Aidy Bryant and Busy Philipps) and is tempted to sleep with one of the company's heirs (Tom Hopper). As written and directed by Abby Kohn and Marc Silverstein, Renee and her friends remain featureless ciphers, mere puppets of a plot and vessels for homilies. Nonetheless, Schumer delivers several moments of antic inspiration (including a wild dance that, unfortunately, is filmed clumsily); Lauren Hutton, as the founder of the cosmetics company, brings a touch of wisdom.—*R.B.* (In wide release.)

Mrs. Hyde

Serge Bozon's sharply political comedy—a giddily imaginative reworking of Robert Louis Stevenson's classic tale—stars Isabelle Huppert, who revels in its sly blend of dissonant humor, intellectual fervor, and macabre violence. Of course, she plays a double role, starting out as Marie Géquil (pronounced like "Jekyll"), a stiffly ineffective science teacher in a nondescript working-class high school filled with students of African and Middle Eastern descent. Then, zapped by one of her own experimental devices, Marie becomes the titular Mrs. Hyde, a suddenly energetic and effective educator who awakens her students—especially one boy, the formerly disruptive Malik (Adda Senani)—to the beauties of science. Yet her newfound ardor for bold classroom initiatives is matched by literal fires that course through her body and eventually burst out, to catastrophic effect. Bozon, working with a script that he co-wrote with Axelle Ropert, confronts and overturns stereotypes of France's white and non-white populations alike, yet his fiercest satire targets the bureaucratic bombast of by-the-book functionaries. As in Stevenson's story, the unleashing of Marie's latent furies inevitably veers toward horror, infusing Bozon's sociological satire with bitter ironies about the forces of order and the uses of disorder. In French.—*R.B.* (In limited release.)

A Quiet Place

Behind John Krasinski's film lies a pleasingly plain idea. The world has been ravaged by sightless monsters, whose enormous ears allow them to pick up the faintest noise—human speech, say—and attack its source. Thus it is that Lee Abbott (Krasinski), his wife, Evelyn (Emily Blunt), and their children, Regan (Millicent Simmonds) and Marcus (Noah Jupe), pursue their lives, as best they can, amid the sounds of silence. In an isolated farmhouse, they walk barefoot along soft paths and communicate in sign language. (Simmonds, a determined presence onscreen, is deaf; you can feel the other actors taking their cues from her.) Dialogue is sparse, although Lee and his son can talk if drowned out by a thundering waterfall. The movie is curt and crisp, easily skirting the gaps in its plot, and the set pieces are laid out at careful intervals; one sequence, packed with fear and resourcefulness, is set in a corn silo. Krasinski has not really made a horror film; rather, he has taken the warmest of American themes—the solace of family and home—and chilled it with suspense. Take popcorn if you must, but crunch it at your peril.—*Anthony Lane* (Reviewed in our issue of 4/16/18.) (In wide release.)

Remember My Name

The writer and director Alan Rudolph's modernist refraction of classic melodrama, from 1978—about a woman who, after her release from prison, finds

and stalks her ex-husband—suggests a quiet revolution in storytelling. Geraldine Chaplin, blade-like yet awkward, plays Emily, who shambles into a downbeat Los Angeles apartment, ingratiates herself with the landlord (Moses Gunn), finds a job at a store run by a benevolent geek (Jeff Goldblum), clashes with a co-worker (Alfre Woodard), and wreaks havoc on a construction worker (Anthony Perkins) and his new wife (Berry Berenson). Rudolph builds scenes from pent-up feelings and searing memories, endowing his actors with a rich range of idiosyncratic actions and inflections and filming them in languid panning shots. Chaplin's performance is a tour de force of frustrated tenderness and impulsive violence; even just driving around, she seems ready yet unable to explode with a volcanic force, and Rudolph captures both her derangement and her vulnerability in jolting yet simple angles. Aided by songs performed by the octogenarian blues singer Alberta Hunter, the filmmaker extracts new cinematic forms from venerable passions.—*R.B.* (Quad Cinema, April 28 and April 30.)

You Were Never Really Here

Lynne Ramsay's film, her first feature since "We Need to Talk About Kevin" (2011), stars Joaquin Phoenix as Joe, who is hired to solve other people's problems. The solution tends to involve extreme brutality, with Joe favoring a hammer as his weapon of choice. His latest task is to find a teen-age girl named Nina (Ekaterina Samsonov), the daughter of a New York state senator, who has run away and, it is said, fallen into the clutches of sex traffickers. (We are asked to believe that they serve the dark needs of the political establishment. It's that kind of movie.) Joe dispenses justice whenever it is required, but such righteous vengeance brings him no relief; every deed, thanks to Phoenix's frighteningly glum performance, is done with a penitential air. Piece by piece, in quick flashbacks, Ramsay reveals her hero's wretched past—a boyhood wrecked by an abusive father, and a stint in the U.S. military, which also entailed the damaging of a child. The spell of suffering is rarely broken, sustained as it is by the intensity of the director's style, with its unyielding closeups and its weirdly heightened sounds. Jonny Greenwood contributes a hypnotic score.—*A.L.* (4/16/18) (In wide release.)

Zama

The bureaucratic and intimate frustrations of a Spanish magistrate in a remote Argentinean outpost in the eighteenth century furnish the director Lucrecia Martel's new film with rarefied passions and inspire a highly original style to match. The middle-aged official, Diego de Zama (Daniel Giménez Cacho), is posted far from his wife and children, and his relentless requests for a transfer are mocked and ignored by local governors. One young subordinate openly defies him; another, a writer, troubles his conscience. He hears from Spanish settlers who've murdered the indigenous population and now lack slaves; an aristocratic woman seeks his help and toys with his affections. With a dreamlike obliviousness, Zama observes and colludes in the brutal injustices on which the colonial regime runs. Then, in despair, he volunteers for a dangerous mission in pursuit of bandits. Adapting a novel by Antonio Di Benedetto, Martel creates a cinema of dialectical tensions; the bustling activity of offices and drawing rooms veers outside the frame while voices of authority and complaint assail the hero with a bewildering tangle of conflicting demands and desires. The dramatic fusion of physical and administrative power captures nothing less than the bloody forging of modernity. In Spanish.—*R.B.* (In limited release.)

ART



Fernando Palma Rodríguez combines software and salvaged materials in his kinetic sculptures.

Ghost in the Machine

A Mexican sculptor disrupts MOMA PS1 with his soulful, unreliable robots.

You may not be familiar with the Nahuatl language, a lingua franca of Mesoamerica, but you already know a few words. “Ocelot,” “chili,” and “avocado” all made their way into English courtesy of the Nahua people, via sixteenth-century Spanish invaders. More than a million and a half people still speak it today. One of them is Fernando Palma Rodríguez, a sixty-year-old indigenous Mexican artist, engineer, and activist, making

his impressive museum début in the United States, at MOMA PS1, with a compact two-decade survey of robotic sculptures, titled “In Ixtli in Yollotl, We the People.” (The show also marks the auspicious début of the museum’s incisive new curator, Ruba Katrib.)

Another word from Nahuatl is “coyote,” the wily trickster that crops up across American culture, from native lore to Looney Tunes. The animal appears twice in the show. First, it shows up in “Soldado,” made in 2001, a cyborg Sisyphus, its cardboard head graced with the bright feathers of an

Aztec warrior. Its blue metal body lurches forward, only to be yanked backward again and again—a slapstick war dance for an unwinnable war. Nearby, in “Coyote Inalienable,” from 2013, a soldier becomes a kind of Christ, hanging high on a wall, its arms extending outward, as if in a blessing.

The exhibition is entertaining, but it’s also a slow burn, balancing chimerical imagination with political indignation, notably regarding disrespect for the natural world. The artist’s renditions of restless deities, insects, and animals, which combine software, electronic components, and salvaged materials, appear purposefully humble, with dangling wires, exposed circuits, and notations on scraps of tape. High-tech but low-fi, they suggest the results of an especially fruitful dumpster dive. The pair of quivering butterflies in “Papalutzin” are cut from colorful aluminum cans, with the Pepsi logo visible on one blue wing—a monarch reincarnated from industrial waste. “Nanahuatzin,” which is named for the Aztec sun god, involves an old sewing machine fitted on one end with a leather glove and, on the other, with the red-and-yellow mask of the *lucha libre* wrestler Solar. Activated, like most of the works here, by a motion sensor, its rapid-fire movements will either startle or terrify, depending on your nerves. It recalls a line from Shakespeare, recently popularized by another robot, on the TV series “Westworld”: “These violent delights have violent ends.”

The artist calibrates his machines to act unpredictably, as if to signal a world out of balance—bodies detached from their souls in thrall to technologies, trapped in an endless cycle of upgrade and discard. But, for all its intimations of chaos, “In Ixtli in Yollotl” has a dark optimism. Like few artists can (Bruce Nauman comes to mind), Palma Rodríguez balances frustration and empathy.

—Andrea K. Scott

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THE BEST RUN



MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

Museum of Modern Art**"Stephen Shore"**

This immersive and staggeringly charming retrospective is devoted to one of the best American photographers of the past half century. Shore has peers—Joel Meyerowitz, Joel Sternfeld, Richard Misrach, and, especially, William Eggleston—in a generation that, in the nineteen-seventies, stormed to eminence with color film, which art photographers had long disdained. His best-known series, "American Surfaces" and "Uncommon Places," are both from the seventies and were mostly made in rugged Western states. The pictures in these series share a quality of surprise: appearances surely unappreciated if even really noticed by anyone before—in rural Arizona, a phone booth next to a tall cactus, on which a crude sign ("GARAGE") is mounted, and, on a small-city street in Wisconsin, a movie marquee's neon wanly aglow, at twilight. A search for fresh astonishments has kept Shore peripatetic, on productive sojourns in Mexico, Scotland, Italy, Ukraine, and Israel. He has remained a vestigial Romantic, stopping in space and time to frame views that exert a peculiar tug on him. This framing is resolutely formalist: subjects composed laterally, from edge to edge, and in depth. There's never a "background." The most distant element is as considered as the nearest. But only when looking for it are you conscious of Shore's formal discipline, because it is as fluent as a language learned from birth. His best pictures at once arouse feelings and leave us alone to make what we will of them. He delivers truths, whether hard or easy, with something very like mercy. *Through May 28.*

Whitney Museum**"Zoe Leonard: Survey"**

The American artist's strangely beautiful, unpretentiously intimate, and adamantly political work is the subject of this powerful show, a nuanced selection of photographs, punctuated by rescued-object sculptures and text. (The exhibition was curated by Bennett Simpson with Rebecca Matalon, of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and calibrated for the Whitney by Elisabeth Sherman.) Carefully structured, on the museum's fifth floor, in seven parts, the survey includes a hundred-and-four-foot-long collection of vintage postcards of Niagara Falls; color shots of New York's vanished mom-and-pop shops, printed in the now obsolete dye-transfer process; and a subversively entertaining archive of photographs of Fae Richards, a black lesbian actress from the nineteen-thirties, which is so lushly convincing you'll be shocked to learn it's a fiction. Some of Leonard's subjects go unnoticed because they're mundane, the way nature becomes incidental in cities (eight pictures document trees, resilient survivors that have grown enmeshed with the metal fences around them). Others are rendered invisible when society turns a blind eye. Between 1992 and 1995, Leonard memorialized victims of the AIDS epidemic in the coruscating installation "Strange Fruit," discarded peels of citrus, avocado, and bananas, their bruised skins painstakingly made whole again with sinew, zippers, buttons, and thread. Seen in 2018, the tenderly devotional project assumes new dimensions—a meditation on bodies violated by gun violence and police brutality, and on the redemptive power of love. *Through June 10.*

Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art**"Haptic Tactics"**

This lively group show brings together artists who emphasize the tactile nature of their chosen materials, tapping into a recent groundswell of art that celebrates craft. One need not be persuaded by the curatorial positing of these modes as queer to enjoy Jesse Harrod's macramé archway of turquoise parachute cord, which hangs in the center of the gallery, or the mystical abstraction of Laurel Sparks's canvases, rendered in papier-mâché, beads, and marble dust. Sarah Zapata's lush, shaggy installation—an explosion of color in a corner—is a patchwork of Peruvian weaving and American rug-making techniques. "Resilience of the 20%," by Cassils, is an outlier, both because it's a bronze sculpture and in terms of its subject matter—the percentage in the work's title refers to the alarming increase in the murders of trans people since 2012. The lumpy, craggy monument, cast from a clay mold, is imprinted with fists, as if formed by violent blows. *Through May 20.*

GALLERIES—UPTOWN

Eva Hesse

"Arrows and Boxes, Repeated," the poetic title of this concise, career-spanning show, identifies a through line in the German-born American artist's early drawings—busy, doodle-like abstractions—and the corporeal post-Minimalist sculptures for which she's best known. (Hesse died in 1970, at the age of thirty-four; all the works here were made in the preceding, prolific decade.) An untitled work on paper, from 1963-64, features swaying stacks of boxy cells, one of them rendered in bleeding tangerine gouache—a playful forerunner to the sombre, cast-latex "Sans III," from 1969, installed nearby. The amber form resembles a flexible, narrow ladder, its irregular rectangular compartments climbing from the floor up the wall. While such juxtapositions convey Hesse's long-standing interest in imprecise geometry and repetition, the exhibition as a whole also illuminates a more whimsical side of the artist. *Through May 25. (Starr, 5 E. 73rd St. 212-570-1739.)*

GALLERIES—CHELSEA

Joel Shapiro

A delectable show of recent works finds the veteran New York sculptor reminiscent. A nearly ten-foot-high spiral of four wooden irregular polyhedrons, painted sky blue in tender casein, suggests a lyrical riff on Shapiro's forbearer Tony Smith. Energetic ink-blotch abstractions reaffirm Shapiro's filial kinship to David Smith, too, as a sculptor who is fluent in drawing. Shapiro recycles past modes of his own with small abstract and semi-figurative sculptures on pedestals and shelves, mounted to walls, set on the floor, and suspended in space. Might the backward steps presage a coming stride forward? *Through April 28. (Cooper, 521 W. 21st St. 212-255-1105.)*

Cy Twombly

The American painter's scrawl is by now so distinctive that its range, as seen in this extensive show of works on paper celebrating the completion of Twombly's catalogue raisonné, can feel almost overwhelming. Starting with thir-

ty-nine index cards adorned with forms that look like stretched-out musical notes, and a row of drawings, from the mid-fifties, in which violent crayon scribbles create bright pops of unintegrated color, Twombly's protean mark takes shape as demure scratches, elegant, hand-writing-like loops, and tidal bubbles and pin-stripes, as in one 1969 series in white crayon on black paper. An untitled 2001 acrylic-and-crayon drawing crowns the nearly six decades of work on view with golden, melting bursts. Uptown, at the gallery's 980 Madison Avenue location, is the stunning "Coronation of Sesostri," an epic ten-part painting cycle inspired by the adventures of an apocryphal pharaoh and graced with lopsided red-and-yellow stick-figure suns. *Through April 28. (Gagosian, 522 W. 21st St. 212-741-1717.)*

GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

Brent Green

A tumultuous installation—a video animation of lovers and monsters and big mechanized sculptures in painted wood and wire, with an audio track of choral music, recited poetry, and fitful song—repeats every four and a half minutes. Febrile paintings, scribbled drawings, and a photograph of a naked woman wearing an open-worked sculpture like an A-line dress or a cage stand by. The mood yaws between nightmarish dread and enraptured amour, welcoming you inside a mind that seems driven by anxiety into non-stop invention. You likely wouldn't want to live here, but a visit enthalls. *Through April 28. (Edlin, 212 Bowery, at Spring St. 212-206-9723.)*

Matthew Wong

This young Chinese-Canadian artist, a self-taught painter with degrees in anthropology and photography, startles with eye- and heart-seizing abstracted landscapes and fantasias. Wong's mode is decorative—powerfully so—with cobbled brushstrokes and saturated colors; Poin-tillism, Fauvism, Klimt, and Bonnard come to mind not as influences but, rather, as collegial parallels. Wong's compositions cohere emotionally, before you are done looking, like cadenzas. His watercolors are little rhapsodies of the everyday. When were you last wowed by a bowl of cherries? *Through April 29. (Karma, 188 E. 2nd St. 212-390-8290.)*

GALLERIES—BROOKLYN

"Living Still"

A painting, by Robin F. Williams, of a pineapple, a paint can, and a rope, makes unmistakable allusions to glowing screens and establishes the theme of this seven-person show: that the still-life genre remains fresh in the digital age. Nine penumbral images of refracted clocks by Michael Stamm riff on painting as a time-based medium. Mark Dorf's plywood installation "Landscape 07," which includes a fake plant, a real plant, and large color photographs of a plant, conflate the real and the virtual. Arguing for sheer visual pleasure are Pedro Pedro's small canvas "Sunday Morning," a Day of the Dead-style skull rendered in textile paint, and Jonathan Chapline's "Domestic Objects," a purple-and-orange living-room scene based on a computer model. *Through May 6. (Transmitter, 1329 Willoughby Ave. 917-653-8236.)*

NIGHT LIFE

ROCK AND POP

Musicians and night-club proprietors lead complicated lives; it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.

The Breeders

In the mid-eighties, a young musician named Kim Deal answered a classified ad, in the Boston *Phoenix*, for a female bassist who appreciated Peter, Paul, and Mary and Hüsker Dü, and ended up joining the Pixies, one of the touchstones of the alternative era. As the group's popularity soared, its internal tensions mounted, culminating in an infamous fax from the lead singer, Black Francis, informing Deal that the band was kaput. (It has since returned, both with and without Deal.) This gave her more time to focus on the Breeders, an outfit she shares with her guitarist twin sister, Kelley. They're best known for their sophomore record, "Last Splash," from 1993, a collection of scrappy alt-rock treasures capped by the slinky single "Cannonball." Their 2013 reunion still hasn't concluded, to fans' delight: they play a run of area shows in support of a celebrated new album, "All Nerve." (*Brooklyn Steel*, 319 Frost St., East Williamsburg. 888-929-7849. April 30. Terminal 5, 610 W. 56th St. 212-582-6600. May 1.)

The Coathangers

Firing out of basements in Atlanta, Georgia, this all-girl agitprop punk group made a name for itself bashing through rickety no-wave bangers with all the subtlety of a controlled demolition. The lead guitarist, Crook Kid Coathanger (Julia Kugel), recently decamped to Long Beach, a move that has coincided with the rough edges of the band's screechy garage rock being sanded away. Though much of its new material has a subdued, beach-psych glow, its live shows are still guaranteed parties. A particular onstage highlight is Rusty Coathanger (Stephanie Luke), a commanding drummer with the kind of gravelly rasp that is generally discouraged by vocal instructors. (*The Stone Pony*, 913 Ocean Ave., Asbury Park, N.J. 347-987-3971. April 25.)

Ryan Hemsworth

The Canadian music obsessive Hemsworth prides himself on creating soft-touch synthesized melodies and rubbery drums drawn from field recordings, unreleased vocal demos, and snatches of video-game effects—all manipulated beyond recognition. His sound was a precursor of the bubbly pop that has become easy to access on Spotify playlists. He's etched out a vast and varied oeuvre through his own releases and remixes as an electronic producer, and with the singles he curates on his Secret Sounds label. He'll have a similarly fetching library for this marathon set. (*Elsewhere*, 599 Johnson Ave., Brooklyn. elsewherebrooklyn.com. April 28.)

Young Fathers

The members of this Scottish group are rappers, but just barely. They squirm around categorization so nimbly that pretty much any comparison—to Joy Division, Saul Williams, the Raincoats, the Ronettes—fits if you squint just so. It's best to take them as they are: Graham (G) Hastings, Alloysious Massaquoi, and Kayus Bankole spent many

nights in Edinburgh dance halls before they formed a group and starting noodling around with karaoke equipment. They soon flash-recorded two demo tapes, employing rattled ragga, tender soul hooks, and snow-static noise to jump from sound to sound with impressive ease. All three members are vocalists and percussionists, a versatility that can be heard in the pop harmonies and stomping rhythms that seem to glue their avant sounds together. "Dead," their 2014 debut, won the prestigious Mercury Prize. "Cocoa Sugar," the trio's latest album, retains their expansive spirit. (*Elsewhere*, 599 Johnson Ave., Brooklyn. elsewherebrooklyn.com. May 1.)

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

"Black, Brown & Beige" & "The Best of Basie"

An utterly fail-safe program mates gems from the classic Count Basie band with a full-length performance of Duke Ellington's "Black, Brown & Beige," the master's 1943 extended piece reflecting on the African-American experience. As Ellington performed the three-movement suite in its entirety only three times in his career, it will be a joy to hear the sweeping work brought to life once again. (*Rose Theatre, Jazz at Lincoln Center, Broadway at 60th St.* 212-721-6500. April 26-28.)

Allan Harris "The Genius of Eddie Jefferson"

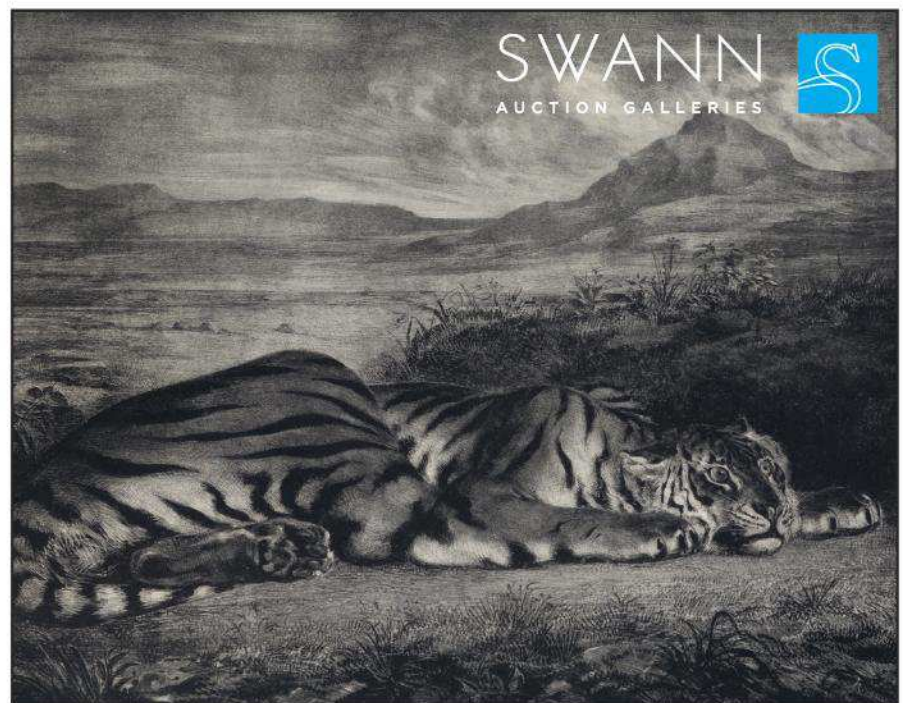
Vocalese, the art of applying original lyrics to the contours of previously recorded jazz improvisations, was perfected by the vocalist Eddie Jefferson, an irrepressible performer who was killed at age sixty, in 1979. Harris pays tribute to this pioneering singer, bringing his own lustre to such touchstones as "Moody's Mood for Love," a Jefferson concoction that's been interpreted by everyone from Aretha Franklin to Amy Winehouse. (*Smoke*, 2751 Broadway, between 105th and 106th Sts. 212-864-6662. April 27-29.)

Houston Person

The immediacy and the soul-stirring beauty of old-school tenor-saxophone playing is still embodied in the form of this vital eighty-three-year-old. Coating blues, ballads, and snatches of bebop in a tone as rich as artisanal honey, Person is keeping the tradition alive. (*Jazz Standard*, 116 E. 27th St. 212-576-2232. April 26-29.)

Chucho Valdes

Irakere, co-founded by the virtuosic pianist Chucho Valdes, was a pioneering Cuban band that first gained prominence, in the nineteen-seventies, for its tangy blend of Caribbean influences and jazz. Valdes, a volcano of a stylist, will assemble a version of the outfit to celebrate the forty-fifth anniversary of the Grammy-winning ensemble's inception. (*Blue Note*, 131 W. 3rd St. 212-475-8592. April 24-29.)



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CLASSICAL MUSIC



Gustavo Dudamel leads two concerts, one featuring the Texan countertenor John Holiday.

Maestro Fever

The Los Angeles Philharmonic's superstar conductor returns to New York.

In October, 2009, eighteen thousand people packed the Hollywood Bowl to see Gustavo Dudamel, a twenty-eight-year-old Venezuelan conductor, in his first outing as the music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Dudamel, an alumnus of El Sistema (a program, funded by the Venezuelan government, that is half social-justice initiative, half mass conservatory, reaching hundreds of thousands of children each year), was already a celebrity. As the conductor of the Simón Bolívar Youth Symphony Orchestra, El Sistema's flagship ensemble, he was known for performances of buoyant, joyous vigor, and also for his enviable charisma.

Now Dudamel's hair—the luxuriant curliness of which was often admired in those early days—is graying, and his conducting, in which he takes evident pleasure, has mellowed somewhat. A sincere interest in music education and accessibility, notably through his Sistema-inspired Youth Orchestra Los Angeles, has helped him avoid being pegged as a diva. Dudamel's reluctance to engage in the political ructions of his native country was a rare point of vulnerability until last year, when his criticism of President Maduro led to the cancellation of two tours with the Bolívar orchestra. Still, his programming courts the spotlight, as with two attractive concerts in which he leads

the Los Angeles Philharmonic this week, at David Geffen Hall.

The first, on April 27, follows a familiar blueprint, setting a popular standard (Shostakovich's wrenching Symphony No. 5) against more challenging modernist material—in this case, “Amériques,” an explosive work that Varèse completed in 1921, while living in Greenwich Village. The Philharmonic also takes advantage of a unique asset by opening with “Pollux,” the first of planned twin pieces written for it by Dudamel's predecessor, Esa-Pekka Salonen.

On April 29, Dudamel conducts two major choral works. The countertenor John Holiday, whose high, clear voice is a thing of astonishing beauty, sings, in Hebrew, the tender second-movement solo in Leonard Bernstein's “Chichester Psalms,” which the composer stipulated could be delivered only by a male alto or a boy treble. (The piece, a characteristic blend of finely calibrated schmalz and devilish brio, has been getting plenty of attention during the composer's centennial.) As at Dudamel's Hollywood inauguration, the main event in New York will be Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, with a quartet of excellent soloists. Davóne Tines, an expressive bass-baritone of colossal range, whose performances have a hypnotic quality, will begin the famous “Ode to Joy.” Its celebration of universal brotherhood suits Dudamel. As he says, “I'm nothing without my musicians.”

—Fergus McIntosh

Metropolitan Opera

Laurent Pelly's tightly focussed staging of Massenet's “Cendrillon,” an enchanting operatic adaptation of the Cinderella story, takes the idea of a storybook production literally. Sentences from the fairy tale are neatly printed on the walls, and, since the director also serves as the costume designer, much of the characterization is built into the witty and endlessly inventive outfits. The top-notch cast includes a trio of distinctive mezzo-sopranos: Alice Coote (a tenacious yet romantic Prince Charming), Stephanie Blythe (a wicked stepmother with scene-stealing panache and a bullhorn of a voice), and Joyce DiDonato (whose singing as Cinderella is shiny and fluttery with hope). The orchestra plays with gusto and gaiety for Bertrand de Billy. *April 28 at 1.* • **Also playing:** A revival of Mary Zimmerman's staging of Donizetti's “Lucia di Lammermoor” features Pretty Yende and Michael Fabiano as the opera's volatile lovers; Roberto Abbado. *April 25 at 7:30 and April 28 at 8.* • Anna Netrebko sings the title role of Puccini's “Tosca,” an alluring, larger-than-life diva who delivers one of the most beloved arias in the Italian repertoire. Yusif Eyvazov and Michael Volle vie for her affection in David McVicar's handsome production; de Billy. *April 26 at 8 and April 30 at 7:30.* • Bartlett Sher's production of Gounod's “Roméo et Juliette” doesn't exactly lend Shakespeare's great love story new impact, but it brings a satisfying simulacrum of Verona to life. Ailyn Pérez and Bryan Hymel play the lovers; Plácido Domingo. *April 27 at 8 and May 1 at 7:30.* • One Sunday each spring, the Met opens its doors for the **National Council Grand Finals Concert**, giving a handful of young competitors the chance to sing two arias apiece with the house's remarkable orchestra. Winners receive a cash prize and immediate national recognition; de Billy. *April 29 at 3.* (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)

“21st Century Sound Stories”

Qubit, a contemporary-music and performance-art initiative, mounts site-specific productions of theatrical works by three of its composer members. “The House of Influence,” by Alec Hall, examines the eroding boundaries between visceral and virtual reality. “Lonelyhearts,” by David Bird with Kelsey Torstveit, employs dramatic gestures inspired by Hitchcock and Lynch. And Aaron Einbond's “Hidden in Plain Sight” uses quotations from Debussy in a series of intimate, immersive encounters. Joshua William Gelb directs the TAK Ensemble. *April 28 at 8.* (Project Q, 1850 Amsterdam Ave. qubitmusic.com.)

S.E.M. Ensemble

The composer Petr Kotik has grappled productively with Gertrude Stein's chimerical prose for decades, a fascination made manifest in “Master-Pieces,” a seventy-minute chamber opera he completed in 2014. Kotik's libretto draws from a lecture on the creative process that Stein delivered in 1936, interspersed with fragments from a diary she kept during the Second World War; his music is spare and arresting. Jiří Nekvasil directs the first U.S. staged performance. *April 28 at 8:30.* (Bohemian National Hall, 321 E. 73rd St. semensemble.org.)

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

New York Philharmonic

The pianist Leif Ove Andsnes headlines a program that questions the principle of the concerto

as a musical argument advanced by an orchestra and a solo instrument. He performs Debussy's *Fantaisie for Piano and Orchestra*, a piece that vacillates between dewy pianistic effects and more rigorous forms. The other two works, Bartók's *Concerto for Orchestra* and Sibelius's tone poem "Pohjola's Daughter," explore the expressive possibilities of the orchestra's many instruments, giving each a moment in the sun; Edward Gardner conducts. *April 26 at 7:30 and April 28 at 8.* (David Geffen Hall. 212-875-5656.)

RECITALS

Orion String Quartet

In the course of six concerts, beginning this week, the formidable ensemble-in-residence at the Mannes School of Music is undertaking a complete survey of Beethoven's sixteen string quartets—works that are by turns fiery, gracious, precise, and deeply personal. The pieces are being played out of order, putting the breadth of the composer's mastery on display in every performance. *April 25-26 at 7:30.* (Johnson/Kaplan Hall, 66 W. 12th St. To register for free tickets, see events.newschool.edu.)

Daniil Trifonov

Trifonov's season-long "Perspectives" series, at Carnegie Hall, is showing the musical range and versatility of a virtuoso who first won notice for astonishing feats of solo legerdemain. This week, he plays two all-Chopin concerts with the great Latvian-born violinist-conductor Gidon Kremer and his ensemble Kremerata Baltica. The programs include solo and concerto music, and two chamber works: the Cello Sonata, with Gautier Capuçon, and the Piano Trio, with Kremer and Giedrė Dirvanauskaitė. *April 25-26 at 8.* (212-247-7800.)

Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center

The Schumann Quartet, a young ensemble that plays with refinement and live-wire intensity, delivers two recitals as part of its CMS residency. First, at the Rose Studio, it collaborates with the pianist Gloria Chien in a program of works by Augusta Read Thomas, Arvo Pärt, and others. Then, on its own at Alice Tully Hall, the quartet (three of whom are brothers named Schumann) offers the Quartet in F Major by its namesake composer, alongside Aribert Reimann's "Adagio zum Gedenken an Robert Schumann," in its U.S. premiere. *April 26 at 6:30 and 9 and April 29 at 5.* (212-875-5788.)

Ecstatic Music Festival

Margaret Leng Tan, a dynamic doyenne of the toy piano and its grownup counterpart, presents the New York premiere of "Metamorphoses," a substantial new work by George Crumb, a veteran composer with an ear for ingenious timbres. The program also includes new pieces by Suzanne Farrin and Kelly Moran, inspired by Crumb and John Cage and commissioned for the occasion; works by Cage and Toby Twining complete a deftly balanced bill. *April 26 at 7:30.* (Merkin Concert Hall. merkinhall.org.)

John Holiday

The numinous setting of Crypt Sessions lends emotional power to the series' genre-bending programs. For the latest installment, Holiday, a Texan countertenor who began his career as a choirboy, takes a break from his current tour with the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Equally comfortable with jazz standards and Baroque opera, he presents a program covering both. *April 26 at 8.* (Church of the Intercession, Broadway at 155th St. deathofclassical.com.)

Bargemusic

Although the pianist Lisa Moore remains closely associated with the edgy contemporary fare she championed during her sixteen years in the Bang on a Can All-Stars, her repertoire is considerably broader. Case in point: in the nineteen-nineties, Moore issued a persuasive recording of Leoš Janáček's complete piano works. She revisits that potent oeuvre to mark ninety years since the Czech composer's death. *April 27 at 8.* (Fulton Ferry Landing, Brooklyn. bargemusic.org.)

Emerson Quartet with Evgeny Kissin

The venerable ensemble, now in its fifth decade and still boasting its original violinists, joins forces with the Russian virtuoso to play three works for piano and strings, in a highly anticipated concert at Carnegie Hall. In a program calibrated to showcase the musicians' technical prowess and interpretative maturity, Mozart's pensive Piano Quartet in G Minor precedes works by Faure and Dvořák (the Piano Quartet in C Minor, and the Piano Quintet in A Major, respectively). *April 27 at 8.* (212-247-7800.)

"A World in Trance"

This three-evening festival brings three exemplary instrumentalists to downtown Brooklyn, each representing an august musical tradition: Homayoun Sakhi, among the foremost players of the *rubab*, a robust Afghan lute; Shahid Parvez Khan, a seventh-generation proponent of an illustrious North Indian sitar practice; and Hossein Omoumi, a potent vocalist and performer on the *ney*, a plaintive Persian flute. *April 27-28 at 8 and April 29 at 7.* (Roulette, 509 Atlantic Ave., Brooklyn. roulette.org.)

Maurizio Pollini

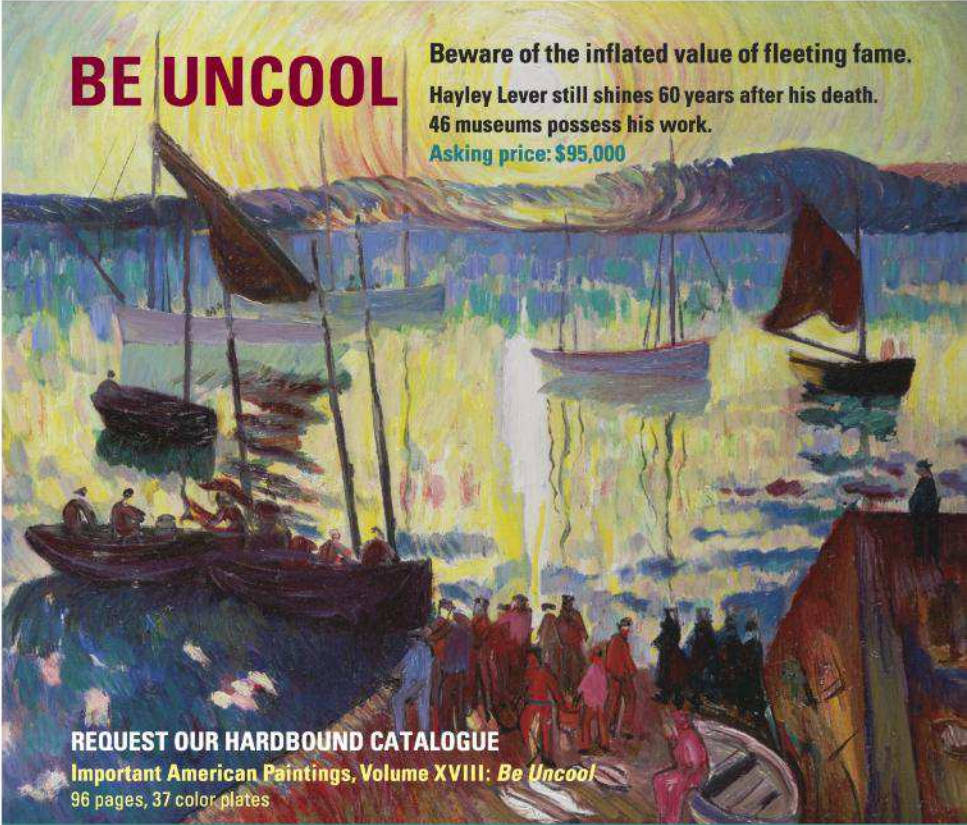
The steely virtuosity for which this iconic pianist earned his reputation has dulled slightly in recent years, but his formidable intellect and keen insights remain undiminished. Roughly half of Pollini's latest Carnegie Hall recital program—Chopin's wistful *Barcarolle* and Debussy's second book of *Preludes*—hails from his two most recent recordings. Rounding out the bill are Chopin's *Prelude in C-Sharp Minor* (Op. 45) and *Sonata No. 2 in B-Flat Minor*. *April 29 at 2.* (212-247-7800.)

92nd Street Y

Two top-flight British musicians collaborate in a recital of Baroque music. Stephen Isserlis, an expressive cellist, plays the most mournful of Bach's cello suites, the Fifth. Later, the harpsichordist Richard Egarr lifts the mood with Handel's Suite No. 5 in E Major, with its fiendishly difficult final movement, known as the "Harmonious Blacksmith." A pair of delicate Bach sonatas, written originally for harpsichord and viola da gamba—an ancestor of modern string instruments—bookend the program. *April 29 at 3.* (Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500.)

Mahan Esfahani

The world of the harpsichordist is generally a placid one, but things have become livelier since this Iranian-born player entered the fray. An accomplished controversialist, he has picked fights with fellow-players and received criticism in return. At Weill Hall, Esfahani offers a multinational program of Frescobaldi, Rameau, Jirí Benda, and Bach (his *French Overture*). *May 1 at 7:30.* (212-247-7800.)



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THE THEATRE

OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

The Boys in the Band

Joe Mantello directs a fiftieth-anniversary revival of the seminal gay drama by Mart Crowley, starring Jim Parsons, Zachary Quinto, Matt Bomer, and Andrew Rannells. (Booth, 222 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. Previews begin April 30.)

A Brief History of Women

As part of "Brits Off Broadway," the playwright Alan Ayckbourn directs his comedy about a man's encounters with remarkable women over six decades. (59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200. Previews begin April 26.)

Henry V

The Public's Mobile Unit performs the history play in its home theatre after touring New York City community venues. Robert O'Hara directs. (Public, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555. In previews. Opens April 27.)

The Iceman Cometh

Denzel Washington stars in George C. Wolfe's revival of the Eugene O'Neill drama, set in a Greenwich Village saloon populated by dead-end dreamers. (Jacobs, 242 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. In previews. Opens April 26.)

Light Shining in Buckinghamshire

Rachel Chavkin ("The Great Comet") directs Caryl Churchill's political drama from 1976, which retells the revolutionary history of England in the sixteen-forties. (New York Theatre Workshop, 79 E. 4th St. 212-460-5475. In previews.)

Our Lady of 121st Street

In Stephen Adly Guirgis's 2002 play, a group of former classmates reunite at a funeral home to

honor their late teacher, only to find that her body has been stolen. Phylicia Rashad directs. (Pershing Square Signature Center, 480 W. 42nd St. 212-244-7529. Previews begin May 1.)

Paradise Blue

Ruben Santiago-Hudson directs Dominique Morisseau's play, about a jazz trumpeter in Detroit's gentrifying Black Bottom neighborhood in 1949. (Pershing Square Signature Center, 480 W. 42nd St. 212-244-7529. In previews.)

A Pink Chair (In Place of a Fake Antique)

The Wooster Group explores the work of the Polish director Tadeusz Kantor and his obsession with the Odysseus myth, in a production directed by Elizabeth LeCompte. (The Performing Garage, 33 Wooster St. thewoostergroup.org. Previews begin April 28.)

Saint Joan

Condola Rashad plays Joan of Arc in the George Bernard Shaw drama, revived by Manhattan Theatre Club and directed by Daniel Sullivan. (Samuel J. Friedman, 261 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200. Opens April 25.)

Summer and Smoke

Transport Group's Jack Cummings III directs the Tennessee Williams drama, in which a Southern minister's daughter falls in love with the neighborhood doctor. (Classic Stage Company, 136 E. 13th St. 866-811-4111. In previews.)

NOW PLAYING

Angels in America

In Marianne Elliott's revival of Tony Kushner's brilliant, maddening, and necessary masterwork, the Angel (Amanda Lawrence) looks like a refu-

gee from an old, crumbling discothèque, or like an Edward Gorey drawing. Elliott, who has won two Tonys, is especially adept at stage choreography, though she does nothing to tone down the play's butch-femme dichotomy. (Andrew Garfield, as a gay man with AIDS, engages too much in the limpwristed school of acting.) The nearly eight-hour, two-part play is filled with wishes, hope, rabbinical anger, fantasy—and with the kinds of errors in characterization that are bound to happen when big ideas come fast and furious, and when authentic characters with beautifully confused intentions serve or get run over by those ideas. But, just when you think Kushner is losing sight of how to handle his creations, he brings out a new and hitherto unexplored empathy for a family that is not biological, let alone chosen. (Reviewed in our issue of 4/16/18.) (Neil Simon, 250 W. 52nd St. 877-250-2929.)

Carousel

The 1945 musical by Rodgers and Hammerstein (in a new revival, directed by Jack O'Brien) is a kind of intimate extravaganza, packed with so many ideas about the body, gender roles, premarital coupling, and fear of closeness that at times its force and clumsiness weigh on you like another body. The two-act spectacle is about the fantasy of love, and how it gets even hotter when it's interrupted or shattered by lawlessness or by death. In a small town in New England, Julie Jordan (Jessie Mueller) finds herself attracted to Billy Bigelow (Joshua Henry), a quintessential "bad boy," who works as a carousel barker at the town fair. O'Brien's direction of Henry, who is black, and Mueller, who is white, is strong, especially when it comes to the way the couple communicate their desire: as if it were no big deal, even as you wait for it to be a very big deal. (4/23/18) (Imperial, 249 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

Happy Birthday, Wanda June

Kurt Vonnegut's 1970 play, about a chauvinist blowhard aggressively clinging to antiquated social mores, has found its moment. In Wheelhouse Theatre Company's revival, a blustering warrior and huntsman named Harold Ryan (Jason O'Connell) returns home after a long absence to find that his wife, Penelope (Kate MacCluggage), has elected to remarry. Worse still, her fiancé (Matt Harrington) is a peacenik whose most treasured possession is his violin. The aggrieved husband, breathing audibly and pantomiming like a primate, struggles to resurrect a past in which he was king, to no avail. (Yes, the whole thing is a satirical take on Homer's Odyssey.) A number of scenes take place in Heaven, where Nazi war criminals play shuffleboard alongside Walt Disney and Jesus Christ. Rarely has surrealist gallows humor been so adroitly deployed in the service of social criticism. (Gene Frankel Theatre, 24 Bond St. 212-777-1767. Through April 28.)

King Lear

Straightforward, unabridged, and never less than lucid, the Royal Shakespeare Company's production, starring a powerful Antony Sher, is an excellent opportunity to experience a top-flight rendition of this tragedy with a minimum of conceptual clutter. The director Gregory Doran offers a gratifyingly fresh reading of several characters, most notably Nia Gwynne's conflicted Goneril. His version is even more than usual about the eyes: David Troughton's Gloucester becomes doubly engaging after he loses both of his, Paapa Essiedu's frighteningly sardonic Edmund wields a lethal side-eye, and in the background of many scenes are three servants who say little but who noticeably notice



Set at a Manhattan birthday party, Mart Crowley's 1968 drama, "The Boys in the Band," was one of the first to depict gay life, pre-Stonewall; a starry revival begins previews on Broadway this week.

everything. Design-wise, Niki Turner's costumes stand out. The fur coat that envelops Lear for the play's first half makes him look like the personification of a big gray beard, and nearly everyone else is dressed in fascinating variations on black and gold. (*BAM Harvey Theatre, 651 Fulton St., Brooklyn. 718-636-4100. Through April 29.*)

Lobby Hero

Does anyone do awkward earnestness as well as Michael Cera? In Kenneth Lonergan's 2001 play (revived by Second Stage, inaugurating its new Broadway home), he plays Jeff, the night watchman at a Manhattan apartment building. His boss, William (Brian Tyree Henry), is a black man whose brother has been arrested for a horrible crime; Jeff gets sucked into the coverup and must decide whether to lie to two neighborhood cops, a macho sleazebag (Chris Evans) and a mouthy rookie (Bel Powley). In a "Law & Order" episode, Jeff would be the guy with three lines, but Lonergan expands this hapless Rosencrantz's story into a funny, provocative study of how difficult it is to weigh right and wrong. The ending may be too tidy—criminal-justice issues certainly haven't had much resolution since the play was written—but Trip Cullman's fine production, wonderfully acted and staged, doesn't miss a nuance or a laugh. (*Helen Hayes, 240 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200.*)

Mean Girls

The witty and withering teen comedy is now a fetch Broadway musical, with an updated script by Tina Fey—this time, the mean girls post mean GIFs—and music by her husband, Jeff Richmond. (The lyrics are by Nell Benjamin.) Erika Henningsen plays Cady, a homeschooled math whiz who relocates from Africa to Illinois, where she must navigate the wilds of an American high school. At first, she falls in with the "art freaks," who persuade her to infiltrate the Plastics: a cabal of popular girls ruled by the glossy tyrant Regina George (the fearsome Taylor Louderman). Fey's 2004 screenplay is so taut and quotable that the addition of songs seems almost gratuitous, and Richmond's music has the interchangeable pop-anthem sound that's become standard on Broadway. But who needs Tina Fey to reinvent musical comedy? She does just fine with the help of the ace director and choreographer Casey Nicholaw ("The Book of Mormon"). (*August Wilson, 245 W. 52nd St. 877-250-2929.*)

Mlima's Tale

In her follow-up to "Sweat," Lynn Nottage makes a drastic turn in locale and genre, going from Rust Belt realism to a globe-trotting, stylized look at the ivory trade. In the opening scene, Somali poachers fell the "great tusker" Mlima (a powerful, haunting Sahr Ngaujah, of "Fela!") with a poisoned arrow. The heartbreaking story then tracks the distinctively grand tusks from a corrupt Kenyan police chief all the way to their end, as a carved "statement piece" in the Beijing condo of a Chinese nouveau-riche couple. Despite its scope, the show, which relies mostly on one-on-one encounters (an ensemble of three play all the other roles), unfurls on a deeply moving human scale, and Jo Bonney's production has a stark elegance, with crucial support from Lap Chi Chu's lighting and Justin Hicks's live score. Never do we forget the barbaric cost of some people's decor. (*Public, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555.*)

The Seafarer

You're unlikely to find a more accomplished ensemble on the New York stage than the one cur-

rently inhabiting Conor McPherson's 2006 play, directed by Ciarán O'Reilly. On Christmas Eve, Sharky (Andy Murray) is gamely trying to keep his battered hearth and home together while caring for his infirm, explosive, controlling older brother, Richard (Colin McPhillamy). Also on hand is Ivan (Michael Mellamphy), too drunk to have made it home the night before. Another friend, Nicky (Tim Ruddy), shows up later that evening and introduces a Mr. Lockhart (Matthew Broderick), who will join the group for a game of poker. It's soon made clear that the gentlemanly guest is there to win more than the odd pot. The dialogue is fast, brash, vulgar, and utterly convincing; the action twists and surprises; and the themes include love, despair, and eternity. (*Irish Repertory, 132 W. 22nd St. 212-727-2737.*)

Three Tall Women

First staged in New York in 1994, Edward Albee's Pulitzer Prize-winning play bristles with unresolved and unresolvable guilt and, finally, with hatred undone. A (Glenda Jackson), a widow, sits upright in a straight-backed chair, her mouth a red gash—she's rich enough to afford B (Laurie Metcalf), her caretaker, and C (Alison Pill), a lawyer who has come to look after her affairs. In the second half of the play, it becomes clear that A, B, and C are one woman—A—but at different stages of her life. Jackson, a two-time Oscar winner, is a gift that the director, Joe Mantello, doesn't so much squander as fail to unwrap. As in much of his directorial work, Mantello reconfigures the script to emphasize the fire-and-brimstone moments that he thinks Broadway audiences will respond to, favoring the flash of show biz over the complications of the flesh. (4/9/18) (*Golden, 252 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.*)

Zürich

A Swiss hotel room is the set of Amelia Roper's ingeniously engineered play. Or, rather, hotel rooms: each scene takes place in a different, albeit identical-looking, home away from home. It quickly emerges that these scenes, which feel like self-contained playlets, are happening at the same time. (Sound cues turn into sound clues.) It's an ambitious concept, and this Colt Coeur production, directed by Adrienne Campbell-Holt, does it justice, with the audience separated from the stage by a glass partition representing the room's windows. Taken individually, the parts tend to meander needlessly, having apparently opted for the late-check-out option, and the payoff is far-fetched. Still, the whole clicks into place, helped by the excellent ensemble cast; Paul Wesley and Juliana Canfield are especially good in the very funny first scene, as a couple the morning after a one-night tryst. (*Fourth Street Theatre, 83 E. 4th St. 212-460-5475.*)

ALSO NOTABLE

Admissions Mitzi E. Newhouse. • **Bobbie Clearly** Black Box, Harold and Miriam Steinberg Center for Theatre. • **Children of a Lesser God** Studio 54. • **Escape to Margaritaville** Marquis. • **Feeding the Dragon** Cherry Lane. *Through April 27.* • **Frozen** St. James. • **Harry Clarke** Minetta Lane Theatre. • **Harry Potter and the Cursed Child, Parts One and Two** Lyric. • **The Lucky Ones** Connelly. *Through April 28.* • **Miss You Like Hell** Public. • **My Fair Lady** Vivian Beaumont. (Reviewed in this issue.) • **Rocktopia** Broadway Theatre. *Through April 29.* • **Summer** Lunt-Fontanne. • **This Flat Earth** Playwrights Horizons. *Through April 29.* • **Travesties** American Airlines Theatre.

DANCE

New York City Ballet

The company marches on, without a clear successor to its recently retired former director, Peter Martins. (It is currently being led by three former dancers who are now ballet masters and the choreographer and soloist Justin Peck.) Before launching into the main event of the season—a Jerome Robbins retrospective that begins on May 3—the schedule is dominated by works by the company's founding choreographer, George Balanchine. In addition to such familiar ballets as "Agon" and "Concerto Barocco," a rarer item has been dusted off: "Le Tombeau de Couperin," from 1975. It's a gentle and lovely piece, set to Ravel, without lead dancers (atypical for Balanchine), in which the geometry of the corps de ballet, organized into two mirroring groups, is the main event. • April 24 and April 26 at 7:30 and April 28 at 2: "Concerto Barocco," "Agon," and "The Four Temperaments." • April 25 at 7:30, April 27 at 8, and April 29 at 3: "Apollo," "Le Tombeau de Couperin," "Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux," and "Symphony in Three Movements." • April 28 at 8 and May 1 at 7:30: "Dance Odyssey," "Pictures at an Exhibition," and "Year of the Rabbit." (*David H. Koch, Lincoln Center. 212-721-6500. Through June 3.*)

"Gorey's Worlds"

The artist Edward Gorey wrote ghostly children's books, designed sets for the 1977 Broadway re-

vival of "Dracula," and, perhaps most famously, created the illustrations for the intro to PBS's "Mystery!" series. But in the dance world he is also known for having been an avid balletomane and, more specifically, an ardent follower of New York City Ballet—he attended almost every performance when the company was in season. He even wrote and illustrated a slim volume, entitled "The Lavender Leotard: Or, Going a Lot to the New York City Ballet," which depicts a trio of sophisticated children making witty (and highly informed) remarks about scenes from the company's repertoire. This exhibition, at the Wadsworth Atheneum, in Hartford, includes the original drawings from that book, Gorey's famous City Ballet poster depicting the five positions, and photographs of him attempting ballerina poses for a laugh. (*Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, 600 Main St., Hartford, Conn. thewadsworth.org. Through May 6.*)

Basil Twist / "Symphonie Fantastique"

This musical puppet extravaganza premiered twenty years ago. To Berlioz's fantastical score, Twist creates a world out of bits of fabric, plastic, and tinsel, all of which move in mesmerizing slow motion inside a giant tank of water, resulting in a kind of magical mystery realm. The music, in a piano arrangement by Franz Liszt, is played live by Christopher O'Reily. Not to be missed. (*HERE,*

145 Sixth Ave., near Spring St. 866-811-4111. April 24-29 and May 1. Through June 17.)

Ballet du Grand Théâtre de Genève

The Swiss company returns to the Joyce Theatre with "Un Autre Passion," by the in-demand Swedish choreographer Pontus Lidberg. The music is Bach's "St. Matthew Passion" (the landmark 1959 Karl Richter recording), but the story of Jesus is absent. Dancers in white seem to float in Lidberg's gently elegant style, sometimes rearranging white panels that serve as screens for arty video of bodies floating underwater. (175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. April 24-29.)

Acosta Danza

Carlos Acosta left his home country of Cuba to become a ballet star, most enduringly with the Royal Ballet in London. Now retired from that company, he has returned to his native island to start a company of his own, and his fame has attracted many of the best young dancers in Havana. The plan is to mix classical pieces with contemporary ones, but the works programmed for the troupe's United States debut all fall into the latter category. Two lively ensemble pieces by Spanish choreographers balance two intimate duets by Cuban dancemakers. Acosta himself, regal as ever, shows off his partnering finesse in a duet by the modish Belgian choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui. (City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. April 25-27.)

Mark Morris Dance Group

Morris's dancers are putting on a two-week season at their headquarters in Brooklyn, which includes a small black-box theatre. It's good to see them on their home turf. They're offering two programs; in Program B, Morris himself shows off his amazingly nimble footwork (despite his considerable girth) in the jokey piece "From Old Seville." (He was a serious flamenco student as a child.) That program also includes one of the most striking works in the Morris canon, "One Charming Night," about a vampire and the young woman who loves him. Program A is a compendium of dances set to the music of Lou Harrison, a lover of Eastern musical traditions. (Mark Morris Dance Center, 3 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn. 866-811-4111. April 25-29. Through May 6.)

Megan Williams Dance Projects

In "One Woman Show," Williams, an alumna of Mark Morris Dance Group with a zany streak, channels the tragic and comedic heroines of golden-age Hollywood films and comments on aging and misogyny. There are elements of autobiography, but, despite the title, Williams is not alone. The eight-member cast that supports her includes the excellent Dylan Crossman and Kristen Foote. (Joe's Pub, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555. April 26-28.)

New York Theatre Ballet

A few weeks ago, Diana Byer's chamber company performed three intimate ballets by Jerome Robbins, the largest of which, "Septet," was for five dancers. They're late Robbins opuses, and none is a masterpiece, but they exhibit many of the qualities for which Robbins is known and loved: keen musicality, humanity, and camaraderie among the dancers. The most curious, "Concertino," is a trio for two men and a woman, set to Stravinsky. In its sparseness and air of experimentation, it echoes Frederick Ashton's "Monotones." First, the three all dance together, and then each has an eccentric little monologue. This weekend, the company will

reprise these ballets and unveil a new work, created for it by the British choreographer Richard Alston, with a score by John Cage, "The Seasons," originally composed to accompany a dance, now lost, by Merce Cunningham. (Florence Gould Hall, 55 E. 59th St. 800-982-2787. April 27-28.)

Melinda Ring / Special Projects

For her second show at the Chocolate Factory this month, Ring collaborates with Renée Archibald for "Shiny Angles in Angular Time." It's a solo that places Archibald in a black-box-style arrangement nestled inside the theatre's usual white, industrial template. Through video and choreographic means, the work plays with theatrical perspective and the relation of a human figure to the space around it. (5-49 49th Ave.,

Long Island City. 866-811-4111. April 27-28 and May 1. Through May 5.)

"Works & Process" / "AFTERITE"

The British choreographer Wayne McGregor, known for his use of extreme ballet technique—moves requiring hyper-flexibility, perilous-looking partnering, non-stop movement—is creating a dance for American Ballet Theatre's spring season. The music is Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring," a score that has not ceased to fascinate choreographers since its première, in 1913. At the Guggenheim, McGregor will discuss the ideas behind his interpretation, and work on the piece with dancers from A.B.T., shedding light on his cooperative and improvisational choreographic method. (Fifth Ave. at 89th St. 212-423-3575. April 29-30.)

ABOVE & BEYOND



Brisket King

Beef brisket is known among barbecue enthusiasts as one of the most difficult cuts of meat to prepare; it can demand as many as eighteen hours of attention, and there is a narrow window between undercooking and overcooking. More than twenty chefs put their methods to the test at this annual competition, now in its seventh year, where celebrity judges—including Dana Cowin, the former editor of *Food and Wine*, the cookbook author Peter Kaminsky, and the onetime "Top Chef" contestant Grayson Schmitz—will crown the city's best brisket. Attendees can purchase tickets that are good for unlimited tastings and drinks, and can cast a vote for the People's Choice Award. (110 Kent Ave., Williamsburg. brisketkingnyc.com. April 25 at 6.)

Street Games

Since 2007, neighbors of Thomas Jefferson Park have welcomed spring by introducing their children to a bygone form of entertainment commonly known as "going outside." At this event, kids five and older can enjoy classic recreational activities from the nineteen-sixties and seventies, including pogo sticks, hula hoops, rumbling boxcar races down First Avenue, and quick-skipped double Dutch, while spectators may take in a yo-yo master at work or a performance by the Dance Theatre of Harlem. Food and drinks will be sold on site; children who complete five of the ten activities on their personal Street Games Passport can claim a prize. (112th St. at First Ave. nycgov-parks.org. April 25 at 11 A.M.)

READINGS AND TALKS

92nd Street Y

Wallace B. Mendelson has studied the mechanisms and processes of sleep for more than four

decades. A psychiatrist and former professor at the University of Chicago, he has written books on sleep patterns, disorders, and optimal practices. In this talk, Mendelson frames slumber in physiological, personal, and social contexts, and discusses the causes of insomnia, excessive fatigue, and other undesirable yet all-too-common conditions. (1395 Lexington Ave. 212-415-5500. April 25 at 6:30.)

McNally Jackson Books

Viv Albertine reads from her latest book, "To Throw Away Unopened." It follows her 2014 memoir, "Clothes, Clothes, Clothes. Music, Music, Music. Boys, Boys, Boys," which chronicled her defiant years as the guitarist of the all-girl British punk group the Slits. The new book was inspired by Albertine's mother's diaries, which she found, after her mom died, in a bag labelled with the words that became the book's title. (52 Prince St. 212-274-1160. April 26 at 7.)

Rizzoli Bookstore

The watering hole enjoys its own category in New York City landmarks of lore. Disappearing façades and storefronts make eulogizing a local pastime; the few small businesses and mom-and-pop taverns that stick it out are bestowed with a mystical authenticity just for being present, like a participation trophy awarded by natives. The artist, writer, and bartender John Tebeau celebrates a collection of such spots in "Bars, Taverns, and Dives," an illustrated guide to historic city saloons from the East Village to Astoria and back. Joining him in a discussion of New York's historic bars are the authors Amanda Schuster, Robert Simonson, and David Wondrich. Toby Cecchini, a co-owner of the Long Island Bar, moderates. (1133 Broadway. rizzoli-bookstore.com. May 1 at 6.)

FOOD & DRINK



TABLES FOR TWO

Miznon

435 W. 15th St. (646-490-5871)

In 2016, Michael Solomonov, the Israeli-American chef and owner of Zahav, an acclaimed “modern Israeli” restaurant in Philadelphia, opened a stand in Chelsea Market called Dizengoff, specializing in hummus and pita. At the time, each was perhaps the best in New York, the hummus whipped, with cumin, lemon, garlic, and tahini, until tantalizingly silky and light, the pita thick, soft, and chewy, with just a hint of charred crust.

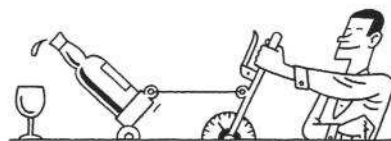
Two years later, both are still exceptionally good. But it’s lucky for Solomonov that Miznon—the first U.S. outpost of a small, beloved international chain started by the Israeli celebrity chef Eyal Shani, which opened a few months ago, also in Chelsea Market—doesn’t offer hummus, because when it comes to pita primacy Dizengoff has been knocked off the podium. It seems almost unfair to compare Miznon pita to any other pita. Miznon pita is plush, Miznon pita is pillowy—I would happily take a nap on a stack of Miznon pita. It’s as stretchy and pliant as Neapolitan pizza dough, its surface similarly taut and golden brown, glistening ever so slightly with oil. It cradles whatever you stuff it with as supportively as a hammock, efficiently absorbing the flavors of herb-flecked ground-lamb kebab,

roasted mushrooms, or spicy fish stew.

And stuff it you must: Miznon trades mostly in pita sandwiches, a dozen or so varieties each day, plus a few sides, including a whole-roasted baby cauliflower, a dish Shani claims to have originated, and the more convincingly proprietary and surprisingly delicious “run-over potato,” a baked spud so thoroughly flattened under parchment paper that it looks at first like a tray of nothing. When I asked, the other day, if I could purchase a plain pita, my request was denied. “Sometimes we have scraps that we give to children, but the chef doesn’t want people taking the pita home and reheating it, messing it up,” a cashier told me apologetically. There was nothing to do but order more pita: pita overflowing with thin but juicy flaps of “rib-eye minute steak,” buoyed by tahini and spicy zhug. Pita sheathing a supple yellow omelet, laced with salt and crunchy za’atar and adorned with a stalk of raw scallion. Pita enveloping the “folded cheeseburger” that Shani developed especially for New York, featuring a sheet-like patty of grass-fed beef, griddled briefly and then wrapped around Cheddar and griddled some more, until the meat is medium-rare and the edges of the cheese have gone lacy and crunchy. Smothered in sour cream, pickles, and tomato, it turns New York’s best pita into one of New York’s best burgers. (*Pita sandwiches \$7–\$13.50.*)

—Hannah Goldfield

BAR TAB



Anyway Café

34 E. 2nd St. (212-533-3412)

Behind the blond-wood bar at Anyway Café, the bartender is whittling a horseradish root, slicing off long pale strips with a little knife. They are bound for one of the large jars of vodka behind her, which are infusing, slowly, with ingredients including black currants, beets, honey, and ginger. These fierce spirits are mixed into the bar’s signature Martinis: Katherine the Great (pomegranate vodka, black-pepper vodka, rosewater), Madam Padam (blueberry vodka, champagne). Best and strangest of all is the borscht Martini—beet vodka and dill vodka, sprinkled with Himalayan pink salt and crushed herbs, a pungent, tangy punch in a frosty glass. It’s easy to down one after another, licking the salt from the rim. In this cavernous subterranean space, the chairs are filled with East Village denizens out for an evening of Russian music and appropriate refreshments; chilled carafes of vodka and plates of pelmeni (Siberian dumplings) are scattered on the tables, consumed dreamily to the sound of an accordion. A tall woman with a long black mane solicits an editorial from a curly-haired writer, and another woman at the table tells a story set at a klezmer-music conference. The man on the accordion, in a duet with a pale-throated young woman in a shawl, sings the Second World War ballad “Tyomnaya Noch” (“Dark Night”) as evening settles in over the neighborhood. “The dark night separates us, my love,” they sing, “and the black, tormented steppe stretches between us.” One table speaks in a jumbled mix of Russian and Ukrainian; when it comes time to make a toast, they say “Bud’mo,” Ukrainian for “Let us be.” —Talia Lavín



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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT UNRULE OF LAW

The enlistment, last Thursday, of Rudolph Giuliani—the former mayor of New York and now a purveyor of security advice and partisan rants—as a personal lawyer to Donald Trump marked the entry into the President’s legal drama of another character whose presence was unlikely and yet somehow inevitable. It was of a piece with the moment, earlier in the week, when lawyers for Michael Cohen, another Trump attorney, asserted that a client whose identity Cohen was anxious to keep secret was Sean Hannity, of Fox News. That came during a court hearing that was also attended by Stormy Daniels, the adult-film actress and director, who is in a legal fight with Cohen and Trump over a hush agreement. Giuliani says that his job is to quickly “negotiate an end” to the investigation by the special counsel Robert Mueller into Russian interference in the 2016 election—as if that matter, and related issues that Mueller has uncovered, were akin to a casino bankruptcy restructuring, in which debts and bad behavior can simply be swept away.

Also last week, in the interval between a statement from Hannity to the effect that he wasn’t *exactly* Cohen’s client and Giuliani’s claim that he was going to be what might be called the fixer di tutti fixers, James Comey, the former F.B.I. director, published a memoir, “A Higher Loyalty.” (A striking element of the book is Comey’s comparison of Trump’s circle to the Mafia.) To complicate matters even further, Comey, whose firing fea-

tures prominently in Mueller’s investigation, once worked for Giuliani, when Giuliani was the U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York. In the book, Comey describes Giuliani standing in his office doorway, giving him a “pep talk” about investigating Al Sharpton, at the time a community activist, for alleged embezzlement, which Giuliani concluded by saying, “Oh, and I want the fucking medal”—meaning the medallion that Sharpton often wore. (Sharpton was eventually acquitted on state charges.)

The Comey-Giuliani connection is another reminder of how the Trump Presidency has dragged us back to the gaudy, big-shouldered Manhattan of the nineteen-eighties. But even Comey appeared thrown by the plot twist involving his old boss. During an interview on Thursday night at Town Hall, when *The New Yorker’s* David Remnick asked Comey about the Giuliani ap-

pointment, he paused for a long moment and said, “I don’t know what to make of it.” He added, “I don’t know what the attorney-client dynamic is like around the President.”

The same night, memos that Comey had written after his meetings and phone calls with Trump, which multiple congressional committees had obtained from the Justice Department, were leaked to the press. In one, about a dinner at the White House at which the President asked for his loyalty, Comey said that the experience of talking to Trump was “chaotic, with topics touched, left, then returned to later, making it very difficult to recount in a linear fashion.” It was, he wrote, “conversation-as-jigsaw-puzzle.” That description could fit any attempt to summarize the various Trump scandals. Trying to explain how they all intersect begins to sound like a verbal version of those charts in investigators’ offices, with pictures and yarn connecting pins in locations as far-flung as Moscow, Washington, Prague, Kiev, Ankara, Baku, Dubai, Hong Kong, a parking lot in Las Vegas, and various suites in Trump Tower—and, at the center, the President.

And yet, in the disparate cases, one can already glimpse a clear theme: Trump’s disdain for legal limits and, perhaps more dangerous, his almost uncanny ability to draw others into his vision. Comey writes in his memoir that, in a White House where lying, or remaining silent as the President lies, is considered an essential act of loyalty, he could “see how easily everyone in the room could become a co-conspirator to his preferred set of facts, or delusions.” Michael Avenatti,



the lawyer for Stormy Daniels, whose proper name is Stephanie Clifford, told *The New Yorker* that he regards her case not as a sideshow but as a “sine qua non.” Avenatti, who is clear-eyed about the uses of publicity, is eagerly envisioning himself sharing headlines with Giuliani as the legal actions converge. What distorts the President’s judgment, Avenatti says, is “a misconception as to the importance of loyalty, or perceived loyalty.”

The assumption that, if one is President, the law hardly matters is apparent even in White House moves that fall within traditional policy areas. Many legal observers, for example, were struck by how poorly written the first versions of Trump’s travel-ban executive orders were, and the Administration’s initial attempts to argue that judges shouldn’t even have a role in reviewing the orders failed badly in several federal courts.

This Wednesday, the Supreme Court will hear oral arguments in the case of *Trump v. Hawaii*, about the Administration’s latest revised order. One hurdle for the Administration’s lawyers will be explaining the President’s tweets, in which he suggested that this new version was just a “politically correct” placeholder that should be the basis for something “much tougher.”

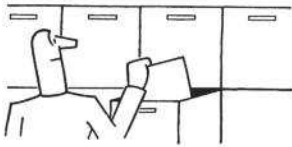
Often enough, Trump drives away lawyers when he doesn’t like what they tell him, a culling that might shape the character of the remaining herd. (A similar effect may be seen in the spate of resignations in the Republican congressional caucus.) But the rewards for staying in Trump’s circle are increasingly elusive, even for the ambitious or the public-spirited, who feel that it is their duty to serve any President. There is a growing prospect that the price for doing so is not only indignity but an indict-

ment, or at least lawyers’ fees, when one is called as a witness.

Last Wednesday, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that Trump had consulted with one of his divorce lawyers, Jay Goldberg, who is also a former prosecutor, about the question of whether Cohen, who seems to be facing a raft of charges for financial crimes, might flip, and become a witness against him. The idea that Trump would consult someone who was also his divorce lawyer on this point is another sign of how much his concept of the law centers on him and his personal needs. Goldberg said that he had advised Trump not to trust Cohen, or almost anyone facing a long jail sentence. The “attorney-client dynamic,” to use Comey’s phrase, between Trump and Cohen may, for the President, turn out to be explosive. And Cohen isn’t the President’s only lawyer, or his only problem.

—Amy Davidson Sorkin

RETROSPECTIVE DEPT. THE ADVOCATE



Dick Leitsch, an early gay-rights activist, who is now in his eighties, arranged to donate his old working files to the archives of the New York Public Library. The decision was prompted by a diagnosis of terminal cancer. “Because I’m dying, everybody thinks I’m interesting,” he said the other day, in his Upper West Side apartment. “Had I known how much fun this would be, I’d have done it a lot sooner.”

In 1959, when Leitsch was twenty-four, he left his family home, in Kentucky, for New York City, where he found work as a painter, a bartender, a decorator, a journalist, and as the unpaid president of the Mattachine Society, one of the first gay-rights organizations. He led campaigns to end police entrapment and discrimination by local bars, culminating in the 1966 “sip-in” at Julius’, in the Village. When the Stonewall riots broke out, three years later, he was the only openly gay reporter on the scene, covering the event for a new gay-focussed magazine called *The Advocate*.

On a recent Friday evening, Leitsch’s buzzer rang. “The party’s coming, the party’s coming!” he said, moving toward the door. He wore black pants and an olive V-neck sweater over a plaid shirt, and brown moccasins. “Since they told me I’m dying, every day has been like this. I get no rest whatsoever. Everybody in the world is turning up.”

At the door stood a burly man with a shaved head and a chevron mustache. He was wearing khakis and a white button-down, and an I.D. affixed to a lanyard around his neck announced that he was Jason Baumann, an assistant director for collection development and the L.G.B.T.Q.-initiative coordinator for the N.Y.P.L. He was holding a plastic bag.

“What’d you bring me?” Leitsch asked. “Oh, sorry, not for you. It’s cat food.”

In the dining room, Baumann took note of about two dozen cardboard boxes. “With archives, people always end up giving you things that you didn’t anticipate,” Baumann said. “We’ll weed out extraneous items, like bills and Chinese menus.” The rest will be preserved in a concrete repository, set to sixty-five degrees Fahrenheit, underneath Bryant Park.

“You have your job cut out for you,” Leitsch said. “I can’t believe all this crap.”

Baumann took inventory, applying yellow Post-it notes marked “Library”

on various items. “This card file is great,” he said, flipping through a set of four-by-six index cards on which Leitsch had neatly typed out gay slang terms from antiquity. In the seventies, an “Alice Blue Gown” was a uniformed police officer. A “basket” was “the bulge caused by the organs when wearing tight pants.” Some of the definitions were more nuanced: an “auntie,” Leitsch had written, was “an ageing or middle aged homosexual, oft-times effeminate in character,” or “a person of settled demeanor who cautions against intemperate acts.”

“As long as I’m alive, if you have any questions, I’m around,” Leitsch offered.

In a filing cabinet, Baumann discovered a row of manila folders bursting with yellowed newspaper clippings. Leitsch used to collect mentions of the “homophile movement,” a term that preceded the modern gay-rights vocabulary. “Clipping files make me a little crazy,” Baumann said, and shut the drawer.

Next up was Leitsch’s collection of magazines and newsletters, including *After Dark* (“Oh, bless you—they’re real collector’s items,” Baumann said); *Christopher Street* (“We have the archives”); *Female Mimics* (“That’s fabulous”); the 1969 *Time* issue on homosexuality (“Cute”); and the monthly bulletin for the Mattachine Society. There were only three other contributors, but Leitsch

had given each of them several pen names, to make the outfit appear bigger. A 1971 issue of *Gay* featured an interview that Leitsch had conducted with a twenty-five-year-old Bette Midler. (“Escape is necessary sometimes,” Midler had said. “Don’t escape into bullshit. Get stoned and listen to Santana.”)

Wrapping up, Baumann said that he’d return in a week or so. Leitsch would sign a deed of gift to the library and they’d arrange a pickup.

After Baumann left, Leitsch sat down on a magenta sleeper sofa. “Every item in this apartment has a story,” he said. He pointed at a framed photograph of himself, in a gray blazer and a striped wool tie, from high school. “In Kentucky, nobody does anything except have babies, go to church, and play basketball,” he said. “And I don’t do any of those, so I wasn’t gonna live there.”

At half past ten, he said that he had to get ready for bed. The next day, fifty friends were coming by for a party, a sort of living wake. He thought of calling the event “Dick Leitsch: Not Dead Yet.” From the couch, he gestured toward an elaborate candelabrum in the corner. “A junkie sold it to me on Christmas Eve,” he said. And then, somewhat sheepishly, “I think it belongs to the funeral parlor across the street. I should give it back to them.”

—David Kortava

BOUNTY DEPT. WASTE NOT



Two dozen gleaners—not to be confused with foragers or dumpster divers—showed up for the second annual International Gleaners Symposium, held recently at the Georgia Institute of Technology, in Atlanta. They were there to discuss the finer points of gathering neglected foodstuffs from roadsides, back yards, and other nonpublic places, and then donating them to the hungry.

The gleaners sat in a classroom, drinking coffee and eating store-bought grapes. They were awaiting remarks from Ashley Pruitt, a local lawyer specializing in civil litigation, who had

volunteered to explain the surprising number of ways that one can run afoul of the law while picking unharvested fruits and nuts for homeless shelters and food banks, as more than four hundred volunteer groups in the United States now do.

“A few weeks ago, I didn’t even know protection for food donation was a thing,” Pruitt, who wore a silk scarf around her neck, said before she began. “But I’ve been studying the case law.”

One attendee, Jennifer Jans, described herself as an “outreach raccoon” for Hidden Harvest, a gleaning outfit in Ottawa. “We rescue fruit and nuts, largely from yards,” she said. “People will sign up their trees. Maybe they don’t want to harvest them, or they have too much fruit.” She listed some commonly gleaned Ottawan comestibles: “cherries, pears, black walnuts, and the rare apricot tree.” Also, “lots and lots of crab apples, which I whine about, even though they’re nutritious and delicious.”

Emily Worm, a network manager for After the Harvest, in Kansas City, Missouri, explained the history of gleaning. “It goes back to the Bible,” she said. “Farmers were supposed to leave the corners of their fields unharvested for strangers, widows, and orphans.” She added, “I think that’s in Ruth? That’s a book in the Bible, right?” She gleaned sixty kinds of produce—“everything from sweet corn to sweet potatoes,” she said. “Strawberries to mustard greens.”

The lecture began. “How do you lose your protection under the Bill Emerson Act?” Pruitt asked the gleaners, referring to a piece of pro-gleaner legislation enacted by Bill Clinton in 1996. (Donald Trump has never tweeted the terms “food waste,” “food bank,” or “gleaning,” although he once wrote, “My two sons, Eric & Don . . . go on safaris & give animals to the poor & starving villagers!”) Pruitt went on, “Let’s say you pick up products from farmers and you donate them. And one day you decide, ‘I don’t want to check the food for bugs or other infestation.’ That may be considered gross negligence.” She added, “Don’t do that.”

A gleaner raised her hand. “Do worms count as an infestation?”

Dave Laskarzewski, from UpRoot Colorado, interrupted. “I think if you knew the fields you were gleaning in

had animal waste—then maybe that’s negligent?”

“Definitely gross,” someone said.

Shawn Peterson, the director of Green Urban Lunch Box, in Salt Lake City, said, “You’re talking about apple worms, right? Well, codling moths have been found to have no harm to humans.”

“Yeah, same with aphids,” a woman said.

Next, the group parsed a bit of legalese regarding the protections afforded the hosts of gleaners. Craig Durkin, a gleaner with Concrete Jungle, in Atlanta, said, “This is basically stating, as



I understand it, ‘We came into your yard to pick apples. If someone falls out of a tree, they can’t sue you, because you’re letting them in on good faith to pick fruit.’”

Someone asked, “But can our volunteers sue us?”

“No, it’s not your property,” Pruitt said. “Unless they fell out of a tree, and then you step on them intentionally.”

“Well, let’s say we’re using *my* ladder,” Peterson said. “And this volunteer falls off my ladder and gets hurt.”

“You could be protected,” Pruitt said. “Now, if they go to your house and use a ladder to save a squirrel, that’s different. The purpose of going up that ladder was *not* to pick apples.” A few gleaners nodded thoughtfully.

After lunch, Durkin led a walking tour of the campus’s fruit trees. “This is a serviceberry,” he said, stopping at a small, fruitless tree. “There’s probably a hundred on campus. They have this great little white flower and this really delicious berry that comes in

around late May here. Like a blueberry. Excellent pie."

"Do you harvest often on campus?" someone asked.

"Yes," Durkin said.

"Do you have to get permission?" Barbara Eiswerth, a gleaner from Arizona, asked.

"I couldn't hear that question," Durkin said.

Next up: the eastern redbud tree. "Everything on it is edible," Durkin said, grabbing a branch. "The bud is kind of sweet and vegetable-y. Like a snap pea."

Eiswerth popped one in her mouth. "More like pineapple guava," she said.

A passing student tried a bud. "About how I'd expect a plant to taste," he said.

Pruitt nodded: "A lot like eating grass, I'd imagine."

—Charles Bethea

THE ARTISTIC LIFE PAYING ATTENTION



The mother-and-son artists Deborah Willis and Hank Willis Thomas stopped by the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, in Harlem, the other day. Thomas carried his mother's tote bag for her as they walked through an exhibit titled "Black Power!"

An F.B.I. most-wanted poster caught Thomas's eye. The hunted man, identified as Hubert Gerold Brown, had a prominent Afro and wore dark glasses. Thomas, who makes politically charged conceptual art, said, "Strange to see sunglasses in a mug shot." Then he noticed the same figure wearing the same shades in a photo of civil-rights leaders. "I've never heard of him before," Thomas said.

Willis, who is seventy and first visited the Schomburg Center as a photography student, before returning as a curator, peered at the image. "That's H. Rap Brown," she said, using the man's activist moniker. (Brown, who once declared, "Violence is as American as cherry pie," has since changed his name to Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin.)

"Oh! He was a political prisoner."

"He still is," his mother corrected.

Willis smiled as she passed a picture

of Joan Baez marching with James Baldwin. "I was asked to direct a music video on Joan Baez's new album," she said. "I called Hank. He said, 'Mom, you're doing too many things. You don't have time.' But it's *Joan Baez*." Of course I had to do it."

They continued to stroll, and Willis nodded at several of the photographs, which she had acquired for the center in the nineteen-eighties and nineties. "Sweet memories," she said. That was before she won a MacArthur Fellowship, in 2000, as a historian of African-American photography, and became the chair of N.Y.U.'s department of photography and imaging. "I had to work late, and Hank was in pre-K," she recalled. "I would pick him up and dash him back here."

"When I was old enough to find my own way, I would come myself," Thomas, who is now forty-two, said. He would ride the bus from P.S. 87, on West Seventy-eighth Street, to 135th Street.

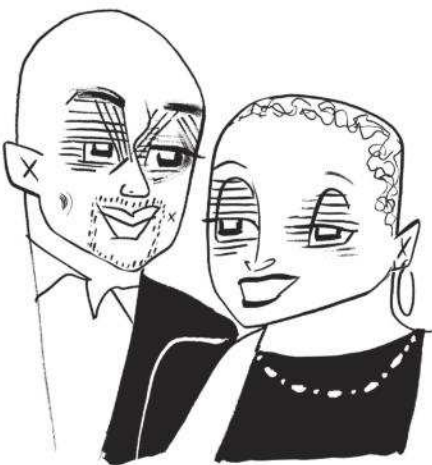
"It was a different time," Willis said.

"It was a much more *dangerous* time," her son said.

"He knew which bus to take: the No. 7 bus; he was seven. I followed him a couple of times to make sure he could do it."

Thomas's gaze wandered toward the phone in his hand. His thumb made a repetitive motion. His mother tapped his arm. He didn't respond. Giving up, she listed a few of the groundbreaking figures who had passed through the Schomburg during her tenure: Gordon Parks, Maya Angelou, Arthur Ashe.

Thomas looked up. "I was playing with my G.I. Joes then. Didn't think much about it." Nor did he give much thought to becoming an artist.



Hank Willis Thomas and Deborah Willis

"He'd say, 'Mom, all your friends are broke,'" Willis recalled. She said she replied, "Yeah, but they're having fun."

Thomas spent hours in the center's research stacks. "Growing up in the archive, I just became hyperaware of the missing images in our society—the images that aren't shown, the stories that aren't told," he said.

Near the F.B.I. poster was a shot of the 1971 prison uprising at Attica, the inmates raising their fists in the air. Thomas used the picture in his latest body of work, which is currently on view at the Jack Shainman Gallery. The series features photographic images of twentieth-century protests—in favor of women's suffrage and the Equal Rights Amendment, against segregation and apartheid. "It's really a reminder that the road to progress is always under construction," he said.

He printed the archival pictures on retroreflective sheeting, a material that obscures the images except when they are struck with direct light, such as a camera flash. "Like on the highway—when signs are dark unless your headlight hits them," he said. "It makes things visible from your unique perspective only if you are shining a light on them. That's kind of a metaphor for history."

Thomas checked his phone again—the latest Trump headlines this time, and his calendar—and reported that Willis's next photography exhibit was scheduled to open two days before his show, at the Shine Portrait Studio, in Newark.

"You're sure on that phone," his mother chided.

"Multitasking. I'm here."

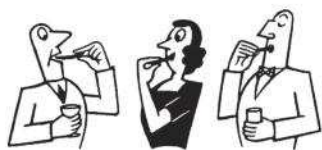
Willis's new series explores people's closets. "I was curious about what made people happy about their clothes," she explained. "My husband said, 'Ask people what they don't like in their closets.' Not one person disliked anything in their closet. That says a lot. They can't wear it anymore—it's too tight, too short. But they have good memories in those clothes."

"You're looking at the closet as an archive," Thomas said. "It's the images we keep, the stories we keep. It doesn't have to be in a library or a museum to be a historical record." Willis beamed.

"See, people don't think I'm paying attention," Thomas said. "I'm always paying attention."

—Julie Belcove

SAN FRANCISCO POSTCARD FEEDBACK



On a recent damp evening in San Francisco, on one of the few remaining blocks of blight between the headquarters of Twitter and Salesforce, two hundred and eighty people gathered in a former printing warehouse. A paper sign on a table inside read “Welcome to Drunk User Testing! We’re so glad you’re here!”

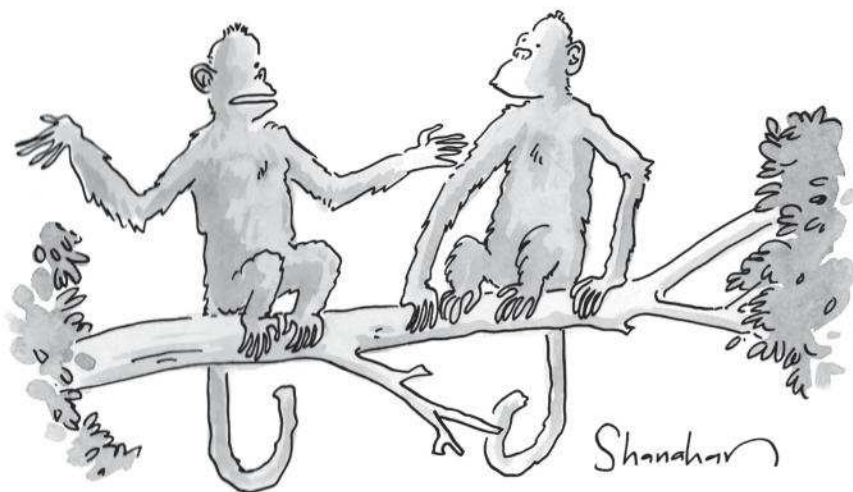
The sold-out crowd comprised mostly male tech workers in their twenties who had paid about six dollars a head to drink unlimited beer and wine and to try out apps. At a registration table, guests were asked to fill out nametags with their first name and their reason for attending. Three suggested reasons were helpfully posted: “Looking!”, “I’m hiring!”, and “Just drinking” (with a smiley emoticon).

Haley Richards, a Dartmouth student from Berkeley, wore a tag that listed her reason for attending as “livin’ life.” She said, “The New York Times Crossword—that’s my favorite app. Except for when I’m drinking; then it’s Uber.”

Drunk User Testing is based on the design principle that an app should be simple enough that even a drunk person can use it. The event was hosted by AppCues, a Boston-based startup that seeks to improve users’ experiences of apps. As the space filled up, Jonathan Kim, the company’s twenty-nine-year old C.E.O., said, “We asked ourselves, ‘How cool would it be to throw a party and let people test apps?’”

Behind a long bar at the front of the room, two bartenders dispensed six artisanal beers on tap, their alcohol content burned into wooden placards: High Water Brewing Mango Rangpur IPA, 6.5%; Epidemic Ales Sleep Disorder Porter, 7.5%; Allagash White, 5.1%; and Ballast Point Grapefruit Sculpin, 7%. There were also six kinds of wine. To soak it up, soft pretzels were on offer—plain or cinnamon—with eight dipping sauces to choose from.

Past the bar, ten companies had set up testing areas. Some, like Couchsurf-



“He uses tools and he flings excrement—what’s not to vote for?”

ing, were household names. But others were less well-known: 15Five (provides performance feedback to workers); TravelBank (organizes business expenses); Kissmetrics (helps marketers analyze user behavior).

After a drink or two, attendees hit the testing areas. At TravelBank, one guest put down his beer and struggled to find the log-in window before clicking the wrong blue button to file an expense report.

“Why did you click on that button?” Angelina Kim, an entirely sober senior product manager, asked.

“I thought that’s what I was supposed to do,” he replied, addled.

“Why, what are you trying to do?” Kim asked. “What’s going through your head right now?”

“It seems like I should be entering some details for this expense?” he guessed. Kim frowned and pecked notes into her phone. The attendee was handed a pair of dress socks as he retrieved his beer.

Each test session took between five and ten minutes. Soon the lines to test the apps grew longer than the lines to get beer. The line for the free photo booth was even longer.

The testing area for Kintone, an app that lets you build more apps, was especially crowded. A four-foot-tall stuffed-giraffe mascot looked on as cheery staff, in warmup jackets emblazoned with the phrase “Love your data,” herded people through. Post-test, vol-

unteers were each given a steel flask.

The pretzels went quickly, as did the beer. The harried bartenders ran out of pint glasses early; they switched to plastic cups, and then to paper cups. They also ran out of three of the beers.

Two hours into the party, Jonathan Kim bounded up a staircase. With a beer in one hand and a microphone in the other, he called for attention. Some guests looked up briefly. The din of alcohol-enriched conversations and rap music overwhelmed his attempt to thank the sponsoring companies. He descended and was swallowed by the crowd, only a small percentage of which, by this time, seemed to be interested in apps.

“The idea of intoxicating a large group of people is good to get a lot of data that you might not get otherwise,” a software engineer named Amy Loftus said, looking around. Her male companion handed her a paper cup of wine. Neither of them had tested any apps. “I was in line to test the Kintone app,” she said. “But the wait was so long I gave up.”

“I don’t want to wait in lines,” her friend said. He wondered about why Lyft and Uber weren’t represented at the event: “They’re the quintessential apps that people use when drunk.”

Outside, partiers huddled along the curb, staring into the glow of their phone screens, tracking their Lyfts and Ubers. It was raining, and they would be waiting longer than usual.

—Blaise Zerega

LIFE SENTENCES

Rachel Kushner's prison novel, like her others, dances between invention and fact.

BY DANA GOODYEAR



Several years ago, the novelist Rachel Kushner followed an inmate at New Folsom Prison, in Sacramento, into his cell. A former Los Angeles police officer, he was serving a life sentence without the possibility of parole for working as a contract killer. Kushner, seeking to learn about the prison system, had come with a criminology professor and his students, but, as the group continued down the hall, she stayed behind, and the prisoner told her about his crimes—the ones he was in for and those which had never been found out. His complexion was ghoulishly youthful, undamaged by the sun: dirty cops don't dare go on the yard. On the cell walls Kushner glimpsed pic-

tures of Harley-Davidsons, relics of a former life. In the five minutes she was alone with him, she told me, "I just felt his *person*, like he went into my skin. You get a whiff of somebody's essence, whether you wanted it or not, and that's enough to write a whole character."

The whiff she got was of a cleaning solution called Cell Block 64, mingled with cop cologne. From this, she wrote the character Doc, in a single entranced session of literary ventriloquism: "Doc had money on his books and used actual cologne and not Old Fucking Spice, either. Good cologne by an Italian name-brand designer he can never remember. But then he remembers: Cesare Paciotti.

It always takes him a minute to retrieve that name." Doc appears, a major-minor character, in Kushner's third novel, "The Mars Room," which comes out in May.

Kushner, who is forty-nine and lives in Los Angeles, thinks of herself as a "girl citizen," asking questions, at large in the world. She uses the novel as a place to be flamboyant and funny, and to tell propulsive stories, but mainly as a capacious arena for thinking. In her work, Kushner draws on decades of American social life and European intellectual history, while remaining open to slinky aberrations—poemlike passages, monologues, lists, a slip into unadulterated fact. "The Mars Room," for instance, contains excerpts from the Unabomber's diaries. This takes swagger. Don DeLillo, a friend, is a tutelary figure. Like him, she is good at conjuring mayhem: a riot, a blackout, a bomb going off at the country club. Her reading taste runs to Marguerite Duras and Clarice Lispector—women who are brainy, sexy, complex, unmanageable. "These are proxies for her," Kushner's husband, Jason Smith, the chair of the M.F.A. program at ArtCenter College of Design, says. "That's what Rachel's into—Spinoza with lipstick."

Butter keeps her slender, along with five-mile runs in Elysian Park, near her house. She says she used to consider it a great injustice that she was not born more beautiful, had to work angles. She is being greedy. "Her whole hookup is badass," Theresa Martinez, a friend of hers who was paroled from prison in 2009, told me. "But you can't nickname a person Badass." (She calls her Stormy: a force blowing in.) Kushner has owned several motorcycles; she skis like a racer, attacking the fall line, and rides around town, wearing Rouge Coco lipstick, in a black-cherry 1964 Ford Galaxie. She wonders, Can one feel cathexis for a muscle car? For longer trips, she takes a beat-up 2000 Honda Accord, with a copy of Steinbeck's journals and Duras's "The Lover" tossed on the back seat.

When Kushner started visiting prisons, in 2014, she had written two well-regarded novels, one about Cuba in the fifties and the other about New York in the seventies. Studying incarceration was a way to address the contemporary, and to understand an obscure realm that outsiders rarely enter. "I wanted to have a life that would include people that the

Kushner says, "I like managing things that are a little outside my control."

State of California has rendered invisible to others,” Kushner told me, the first time we met, at the Taix, a venerable French restaurant where she eats several times a week. (She doesn’t cook.) “The theatrical component of due process is over,” she said. “Where do they go?” Most of “The Mars Room” takes place inside a prison loosely based on the Central California Women’s Facility—also called Chowchilla, after a nearby almond-growing and -processing town. Chowchilla, which Kushner has visited dozens of times, is the largest women’s prison in the world.

Several weeks after our first meeting, Kushner drove the Honda to Chowchilla. It was raining heavily; new wiper blades slapped against the glass. Kushner, in sunglasses, peered ahead, a scarf tied at her neck. As the rain subsided, she started looking for the halo of orange light that marked the presence of the prison in dim fields. “For me, things sometimes circle around imagery,” she said. “It’s not necessarily visual, could be more poetic, but in this case it was visual.” The light was just a puff, an emanation you might fail to register, unless you knew that some three thousand women were locked up there.

“That’s it!” she cried, pointing at the sodium glow. A friend inside had told her that one night there was a power outage, and as she was being hustled from her work-exchange job to her cell block, for the lockdown procedure that accompanies any anomaly—brawling, fog, or suicide—she glimpsed the Milky Way. It was breathtaking. Stars: she had not seen them since she got caught, and, as she was serving two life sentences without the possibility of parole, she might not again.

Romy Hall, the central voice of “The Mars Room,” is a former dancer at a strip club on Market Street in San Francisco. She is serving two life sentences, plus an additional six years, for attacking and killing a regular who began shadowing her on his Harley, turning up at her local market and, when she moved to Los Angeles to get away from him, on her front porch. The night she encountered him there, her young son, Jackson, was asleep in her arms; the extra six years on her sentence were for endangering a minor.

For years, Kushner wrote around Romy, unable to connect. “I came up against hardpan, where you can’t dig down,” she told me. “I would never go to prison for life, because I have these resources to protect me.” Then, as she began to write passages about her own adolescence and give them to Romy, a fusion started to occur. Kushner went on, “Romy’s from my neighborhood. Her friends are my friends. And a lot of her experiences I’m intimately familiar with.” The voice she found—pragmatic, synopated, pained—is tempered by what her friend Bret Easton Ellis described to me as “thrilling neutrality.” “The ghost of my childhood lives in the back of buses,” Romy says, in “The Mars Room.” “It says, What’s up, juts its chin.”

Kushner’s parents—Pinky, a Southern redhead with a ski-jump nose, and Peter, the son of New York Communists—were scientists, integration activists, Beats. Pinky said she wanted her daughter to be a poet and her son to be a painter. (Kushner’s brother, dismayingly, chose medicine.) When Rachel was little, and her parents were graduate students at the University of Oregon, they lived on and off in a school bus heated by a wood-burning stove, and survived on six hundred dollars a month, augmented by food stamps. In the winter, the bus was sometimes parked at ski mountains: one year in Bend, Oregon, and another in British Columbia. The family hiked up and skied above the lift line, the sandwiches in their pockets fogging the cellophane.

Beatnik poverty, in Kushner’s telling, was a kind of gift, helping her develop taste and politics and irony, and leaving her with an open admiration for her parents that you rarely find in adult artists. She read Steinbeck and Nelson Algren and listened to the wacky stories told by her parents’ Prankster-adjacent friends. “I thought, Literature—you really have to know hobo livin’,” she says. “It was reproduced in the social environment I was in.” Interpreting the world, she understood, meant remaining alert to moments when someone does something poetic. “The more in the world you are, the higher your chances are of witnessing that,” she says. “It wasn’t so much about studying literature—it was about *being*.”

When Kushner’s parents got post-doctoral jobs at the University of Cal-

ifornia, San Francisco, they moved the family there, to a neighborhood called the Sunset. Kushner, ten and still in bell-bottoms, was released into a harsh, delinquent youth culture. On the first day of sixth grade in her new school, a girl she had just met asked, “Do you want to come downtown with me? I haven’t seen my sister for a while.” Rachel went. The sister was working as a prostitute on Market Street.

One night, at the Pyrenees, a Basque shepherd bar in the warehouse district of Bakersfield, where Kushner likes to stop on trips to Chowchilla, she drew me a map of the Sunset: forty-eight avenues, south of Golden Gate Park, leading down to Ocean Beach. Many lifelong San Franciscans, she said, have never even been there. “It was decidedly unchic,” she told me. “It’s very wet and foggy out there, all built on sand dunes, no street trees, a bleakness. The housing stock was generic. It was full of girls with big feathered hair who wanted to party and were going to get pregnant by eighteen. Their parents were Irish, from Ireland, and the dads were cops.”

As the novel opens, Romy is on her way to prison, on a bus with blacked-out windows. Thinking about the past she is relinquishing, full of omens she failed to recognize, she tells stories to an unspecified “you,” anyone who might be out there listening: “The Sunset was San Francisco, proudly, and yet an alternate one to what you might know: it was not about rainbow flags or Beat poetry or steep crooked streets but fog and Irish bars and liquor stores all the way to the Great Highway, where a sea of broken glass glittered along the endless parking strip of Ocean Beach. It was us girls in the back of someone’s primed Charger or Challenger riding those short, but long, forty-eight blocks to the beach, one boy shotgun with a stolen fire extinguisher, flocking people on street corners, randoms blasted white.”

Kushner was younger than her classmates—she had started school early and skipped seventh grade. Among her peers, she says, “intelligence was a form of ugliness,” so she did her best to hide it. She fell in with a group of hard-partying, unlooked-after kids, who went by the name White Punks on Dope, though they weren’t all white. As long as she had her act together in school, which

she always did, her parents extended almost limitless freedom. Emily Goldman, a friend from that period, who is now a juvenile defender and sometimes represents Sunset kids, told me, "Coddling was against Rachel's parents' beliefs of child-raising. They had enough respect for their children to think that they would know how to prioritize and make good decisions, and they thought that their kids should take their lumps. But I don't think they were fully aware. I know they weren't seeing what we were seeing. Other parents did see it, and participated. There were houses where the parents would snort cocaine with us."

Kushner was always a risk-taker, game for adventure. Goldman said, "She would go along on those dark nights, in those sketchy situations—fourteen-year-old girls standing on street corners or in the park to see what would happen." What happened: fires, thefts, assaults, arrests, adults betraying young people in sinister ways. Kushner's friend Cynthia Mitchell, who grew up nearby, said, "My sense is she had two lives, an interior life and then this life as—not a ring-leader but an observer. She'd be friends with the worst girls but was not the one to instigate the really horrible stuff."

Kushner recalled that, when she finished the book, her husband told her, "Maybe the bad Rachel is all out of your

system." When I asked him about the remark, he said, "That suggests she thinks there is a bad Rachel, which is interesting. But whatever the bad Rachel is she is probably generative. Writing Romy, she was not exactly purging but attempting to articulate her past symbolically." He paused. "She has a stone in the shoe about childhood."

Many of Kushner's friends from that time didn't finish high school. One, Jon Hirst, stabbed someone in a bar fight and went to San Bruno jail, from which he escaped, running in jailhouse slippers back to San Francisco to take refuge with his neighborhood friends. He was immediately caught, and ended up in San Quentin, then in Susanville, then dead. Kushner went to Berkeley, starting classes in the fall of 1985, when she was only sixteen.

Kushner lives with Smith and their son, Remy, in Angelino Heights, a neighborhood of splendidly restored Victorians and crumbling firetraps perched above downtown. Her house, built at the start of the last century and bought out of foreclosure during the recession, is a large Craftsman with a deep porch, filled with vintage chandeliers and pieces made by artist friends—Laura Owens, Billy Al Bengston—and by her cousin, an ironworker who fabricates for

David Hammons. In the living room, there is a sculpture by the Paris collective Claire Fontaine, a brick of solid aluminum made of melted-down cans, stamped with the word "Redemptions."

From the house, it is a short distance to the Clara Shortridge Foltz Criminal Justice Center, where, in the past several years, Kushner has sat in on dozens of arraignments. "The obscure person commits a crime and is pushed into this carceral light," she said. At arraignments, the defendants, sitting behind glass in the "fish tank," often meet their public defenders for the first time. Kushner, listening to them answer rote questions about their employment history, perceived a pattern, describing lives at the margins. The information accreted into a list that appears as a freestanding chapter in "The Mars Room":

When asked what she did for a living, the suspect said she worked.

Recycling, he'd written.

He brought recycling to a redemption center, he explained.

Recycler.

Recycler.

Recycler.

Recycler.

Redemptions, he told them.

Redeemer was what she wrote.

The suspect said she had mostly made her living by collecting bottles and cans.

Late one Saturday afternoon in April, I met Kushner at her house. From there, we went downtown, past the Criminal Justice Center to Skid Row, where her friend Theresa Martinez lives in an S.R.O. By the time we got to the neighborhood, it was nearly dark, and Kushner was lost. "How did I screw this up so badly?" she muttered, embarrassed by her unreliable sense of direction. "I have walked into closets to leave people's houses before." She parked two blocks from the building, and, holding a bag of KFC for Martinez, steered us through a chaotic scene. Hundreds of people were on the street, in tents or not, in socks, barefoot, injured, cooking, drinking, drugging, calling out, a loose and wretched party starting to crank up. A lot of them wanted a wing.

Martinez, who is in her fifties, with highlighted dark hair, pencilled brows, and a filigree of tattoos on her chest and arms, was waiting outside, tsking Kushner for walking around. She hates Skid



Row. She led us up to her room, decorated with Hello Kitty figurines and made-to-order gift baskets that she sells in the neighborhood. A large television showed the screen saver for a bootleg copy of “Star Trek: Enterprise.”

“I can’t even remember the first time we met, Stormy,” Martinez said, spooning out mashed potatoes. It was 2014, and Martinez, who had been out of prison for five years, was still struggling to adjust. First incarcerated at the age of twelve, she went back to prison at eighteen for possessing, trafficking, and selling PCP. After that, she was in and out of women’s facilities, including Chowchilla, where she was among the first inhabitants. “Over the next twenty-three years, I only had fourteen months of free-world time,” she told me. In prison, she said, she was a shot-caller for a group of Latinas. Eventually, she also became a founding board member of Justice Now, an Oakland-based legal organization that helps imprisoned women address human-rights violations. In 2014, in collaboration with women at Chowchilla, the organization successfully sponsored legislation to stop coercive sterilization in California prisons.

Kushner began visiting Chowchilla as a Justice Now volunteer, and hired Martinez as a consultant on her book. Martinez drew her detailed maps of the prison: the yards, the dorms, the blind spots, Needle Park, and Lovers’ Lane. She told her where you can fight (the porta-potties) and how to make prison cheesecake (nondairy creamers and Sprite) and what Danielle Steel book was the must-read. Martinez’s escapades entered the book, more or less unaltered, through Sammy, a shot-caller who takes Romy under her wing. “You know the situation with the hot-wired cement mixer?” Martinez said, and she and Kushner cracked up. “Theresa is a mastermind of the place,” Kushner said. “It’s a thousand acres, and she explained the water supply, the barbed wire, the electrical system.”

Martinez said, “I told her about the ad-seg area”—administrative segregation, for rule-breakers—“where death row is at. My friend Rosie Alfaro has been back there for eighteen years.” Alfaro, she said, had stabbed a child dozens of times while high on PCP. In her cell, she has a shrine to her victim.

“I put that in the book,” Kushner said. “She’s Candy Peña in my book. I wanted her to be Rosie Alfaro. She will be the first woman since the sixties to be executed in California when they do it.”

“She would have been fine with you using her name,” Martinez said. “We got along. When I was in ad-seg, we sent a lot of stuff through the toilet to death row. We used to flag each other—that’s where you write backwards really fast with your hands, and the police can’t understand.” She traced letters in the air.

In 2000, Kushner’s mother and her aunts invited her to accompany them on a trip to Cuba, to see the lost world of their youth. For several years in the early nineteen-fifties, Kushner’s grandfather, a metallurgist, worked at the American-owned nickel-processing plant in Nicaro, at the island’s eastern end. Across the bay, in Preston, where Pinky and her sisters, DeeDee, Fritzie, and Betsy, shopped and socialized, was the regional headquarters of the United Fruit Company, whose colonial culture held sway over the whole province. The Castro boys’ father had a hacienda there. Like all Cubans, they were excluded from the American commissaries, clubs, and jobs—an exclusion that later became the subject of bitter speeches by Fidel.

At the time of the trip, Kushner was recently out of school; she had graduated from Berkeley, with a degree in political economy, and finished an M.F.A. in fiction at Columbia. She was living in New York, working at the literary magazine *Grand Street* and writing reviews for *Artforum*. When she arrived in Preston, she noticed that the workers’ shacks, four decades into the revolution, were still painted United Fruit yellow, a dusty mustard that the company laced with insecticide to keep malaria infections down. The detail lodged. “This empire had been chased out, but the residue of their dominating gestures remained,” she told me. Her mother reconnected with a Jamaican-born man who had been her family’s houseboy; a proud revolutionary, he accompanied them on a visit to the Castros’ ancestral home. It was being painted, United Fruit yellow.

Kushner remembered other family

stories and tracked them down. From the safety of Chattanooga, where the family moved after Nicaro, her grandfather had been madly envious when his fellow management types were kidnapped by Raúl Castro and taken into the Sierra Maestra, to drink rum and play fast draw for the benefit of a photo

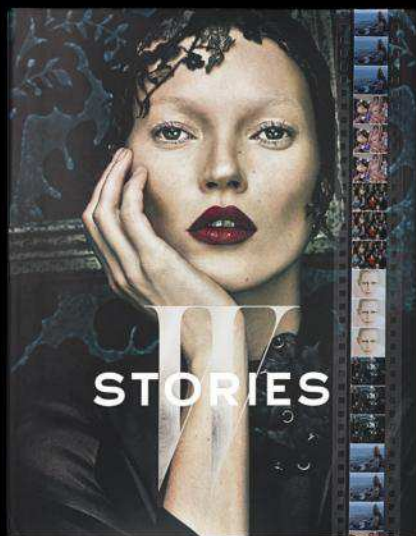
crew from *Life*. After her trip to Cuba, Kushner went to see the widow of one of the kidnapped men, in Starke, Florida. The widow showed her an album of her long-deceased husband, who was secretly half Cuban; on each page, he was posed on the same rock in Nicaro, but each time with a different Cuban woman. A character began

to form, the man who keeps trying to escape the trap of his life.

Kushner told me, “I remember standing in the middle of the *Grand Street* office thinking, What if, when he was released from the mountains, he walked down, went into Nicaro, into his back yard, and pondered not going inside? It showed me what fiction could do, and how to imagine people in a place, and how that would require an understanding of the complicated social matrix of the place—his having hidden his ethnic origins and this pressure of appearances in nineteen-fifties corporate culture and the kidnapping that has to do with this oncoming revolution that would steam-roll everything. I would have to think about this moment, to vividly imagine it and render it, and it seemed really fun to me. And that’s when I thought, I want to write a novel about this.” Her instincts, and the artists she had befriended through her work for *Artforum*, suggested that she go somewhere with few social obligations and cheap vegetables. In 2003, she moved to Los Angeles.

For a few years, Kushner sat on the edge of her bed and thought. Eventually, she began to write. “Telex from Cuba,” published in 2008, is a shimmering account of the turmoil leading up to Castro’s ascent, United Fruit’s expulsion, and the expropriation of the nickel mine. The effort, which feels almost archeological, drew from a comprehensive archive her grandparents kept of their sojourn in Cuba, down to the piano tuner’s business card. But Kushner is





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wary of appearing too reliant on source material. Jason Smith says, "She's resistant to the word 'research.' She's worried that people would see the work as sociological or too driven by historical verisimilitude. Though she's quite emphatic about being right."

In Kushner's view, the value of fiction is its ability to wrap reality in a "mythical envelope," a shroud of meaning-making that can produce stories that are truer than truth. At the heart of the book are two obscure but significant historical figures, doing things they never did. One, perhaps irritatingly, is named Rachel K., a call girl in Havana who intersects the lives of the Castros, of Cuba's President, and of the head of United Fruit. Kushner told me, "My editor, Nan Graham, who has a wry way of speaking, said, 'What is this Rachel K. business?' She doesn't have a lot of patience for that kind of thing. I said, 'That is the name of a historical icon in Cuba who came to symbolize dictatorial decadence.' She said, 'Well, then you *can't* change her name!' Maybe it makes it flawed in a way. I didn't know what the effect of that was going to be, but I like managing things that are a little outside my control." The poet and novelist Ben Lerner, who befriended Kushner after reading her work, says, "Her research is really thorough, but also she's willing to let the net effect of it render the notion of the fact less stable. Rachel K., the most outrageous thing—the thing that seems most like artifice—is real."

Rachel K.'s paramour, in "Telex," is Christian de La Mazière, a French aristocrat. In life, La Mazière scandalously joined the Charlemagne division of the Waffen S.S., during the summer of 1944. But Kushner, seeing La Mazière as attracted to violence rather than to ideology, thought that a Communist revolution would suit him fine. "He was just looking for action," she said. "So I brought him there. I also thought it would be funny. Reversals can be quite generative. Not just for the dynamic of writing but for getting close to truth."

Not long after arriving in Los Angeles, Kushner met Smith, a tall, cerebral doctoral student, finishing a degree in comparative literature under Jacques Derrida at the University of California, Irvine. Jack Bankowsky, a critic at *Artforum*, calls them Dorothy Parker

and Adorno. Smith would say things like "Oh, you're interested in courtly love? You should read Lacan's Seminar VII." That provided Kushner with the scaffolding to write about the idea of absence in Western conceptions of romance, a strain in the Rachel K.—La Mazière affair. She says, "He brought things into the house. It gave me the confidence to read Proust." They were married in 2007, in the same San Francisco courthouse where her parents, after decades of cohabitation, had wed not long before. Later that year, Remy was born. (He's ten now, and does his homework at a lima-bean-shaped desk that Rachel's grandmother used in Nicaro.)

One day, after the book came out, an aunt called Kushner and told her that she'd been listening to Robert Stone on public radio, and he had mentioned that he was reading a great book: "Telegrams from Cuba," by someone named Kushner. Then she got a letter from DeLillo. She worries that it's corny, but she has it framed in her office, next to two certificates citing her as a National Book Award finalist, for "Telex" and for her second book, "The Flamethrowers." DeLillo's letter praises her ease with being in the action—"Telex" starts with a cane fire, set by the rebels—and also acknowledges the humor of a corporate hegemon in the homophobic nineteen-fifties going by the name United Fruit.

One Saturday, I met Rachel, Jason, and Remy at Go Kart World, just off the freeway, in Carson. They are regulars; the young guys working at the track nodded hello. I crunched myself into a car resembling a demonic, exhaust-spewing ladybug and waited for the light to turn green. "Never take your foot off the gas," Kushner advised. She got in her car, a yellow one, and Jason and Remy each got in theirs. Chugging around the track, I caught sight of Kushner as she bore down on Remy, her lips pursed in concentration. "I lapped you guys!" she crowed when we were done. And then, without remorse, "I tried to go slow."

When Kushner was growing up, her father had a motorcycle, a Vincent Black Shadow, but forbade her to ride. After Berkeley, she got an orange Moto Guzzi, an Italian bike for people who favor style over performance. Living in San Francisco again, she took up with her old

crew and started bartending, taking creative-writing classes on the side. Her boyfriend at the time was a Moto Guzzi mechanic. So was the next one. “In my early twenties, I was attracted to men who lived and breathed motorcycles,” she writes in a nonfiction essay about that time. “And I was into motorcycles as well.” A friend from San Francisco, who went on to race professionally, told me, “There weren’t a lot of women that rode motorcycles. There were women that rode on the backs of motorcycles.” What can he say? “She likes machines.”

Like most motorcycle stories, this one ends abruptly: Kushner, in ill-fitting leathers, riding a Kawasaki Ninja 600 on Highway 1 in Baja, going over her handlebars at a hundred and thirty miles an hour. When the road rash healed, she was more or less done with riding, and ready to write about it. I mention this history because it is Kushner’s nightmare to be thought of as a dilettante—someone who rode on the back, saw a picture in a magazine, entered search terms in Google. Her immersion is the art. The written record is an artifact of the experience.

In this way, she has something in common with Reno, the twentysomething narrator of “The Flamethrowers,” which came out in 2013. When we meet Reno, she is heading for the Bonneville Salt Flats, where she is planning to make tire tracks and photograph them. (It’s the mid-seventies, and motorcycle drawing is a thing.) When it’s her turn to ride, she gooses her motorcycle up to a hundred and forty-eight miles an hour. “I was in an acute case of the present tense,” she explains, just before a gust of wind throws her from the back of her machine.

After recovering and setting a record at Bonneville as the fastest woman in the world, Reno returns to New York, where she has recently moved, from Nevada, with an art-school degree. Knowing scarcely a soul, she exhibits a founding’s openness to experience. Through her boyfriend, Sandro Valera, a mid-career brushed-metal-box artist and the scion of an Italian industrial family known for producing motorcycles, she enters a scene of mostly older, male artists—minimalists, performance artists, land artists—who can’t stop talking. In the galleries, on the street, at Max’s, Reno sees performance “of a nature so sub-



“Come on, you know the words! Bum bum bum bum!”

tle . . . that one was left unsure if the thing observed was performance or plain life.”

We never learn Reno’s real name. Her nickname is given to her by a flirtatious friend of Valera’s, who also praises her looks: a “cake-box appeal,” partly spoiled by a gap-toothed grin. She is anonymous and, to those around her, generic—a passive audience for male speechifying and dissimulation. Kushner said, “It’s a first-person voice. I wanted it to be like fact, like thought. She doesn’t talk a lot, because she’s around these blowhards who suck up all the air.” But, she went on, “I don’t see her as defeated or as ruined by men.”

Kushner’s own aesthetic education involved periods of intent reticence, an evolution of the observer-participant stance she took with her friends in the Sunset. “When I moved to New York and met artists, they were all older and part of a group of friends, and knew about music and art and architecture, and they were funny, and I was only going to learn by listening,” she said. “I felt that about Reno. She wasn’t one of the players yet.” In her late twenties, when Kushner started writing reviews for *Artforum*, she went to every opening and art party she could, gathering intelligence. “‘The Flamethrowers’ is about the seventies in New York, but a lot of her data comes from her immersion in the art world today,”

Bankowsky, of *Artforum*, told me. “She spoofed me”—sending up the graffiti-covered dining table that he and his partner, the gallerist Matthew Marks, have in their townhouse—“and my mother discovered it before I did. She said, ‘Who is this Rachel Kushner?’”

With the exception of a couple of grumpy reviews—one male critic disparaged the book as “macho”—“The Flamethrowers” was widely received as a triumph of ingenious writing, and specifically as a triumph for women. Writing in *Salon*, Laura Miller placed “The Flamethrowers” in the category of Great American Novel, the kind of book, usually written by a man and featuring a male protagonist, that purports to “speak on behalf of an entire, fractious nation.” She wrote, “It has a seamless confidence in itself and in the significance of what it has to say that you don’t realize was missing from most fiction by American women novelists until you see it exhibited in Kushner. She seems not so much to be defying the masculine prerogative in this genre as to be unaware of it in the first place.”

One of the achievements of “The Flamethrowers” is to tell a secret history of a heavily mythologized, combed-over American moment. The artist Richard Prince (whom Kushner also spoofs) told me that most of the time when he reads

about the art world, about rooms he was in, he thinks, That's not what happened. "You're left alone with the private version, the wild history," he said. "I think Rachel wrote a little bit of the wild history." What he still can't figure out is how she got in the room.

During the rainstorm, Chowchilla got locked down. The next morning, when we arrived, the sky was blue; along the prison road, the almond orchards bloomed pale pink. Outside the visitors' entrance, there was a field of solar panels, powering the electric fence. "The guards joke that in California you can get electrocuted by green energy," Kushner said. Inside, a couple of guards discussed plans for a trip to the mountains, while they counted how many clear-chambered pens were in our ziplock bags, how many watches and rings. "I can't wait to get to the snow," one said. "It's a whole fairy world up there." A flyer tacked to the wall exhorted them to "Embrace the Present" and offered a hotline number for staff in need of counselling.

Kushner was wearing a black velvet jacket with gray slacks, and a lick of silver eyeshadow—her friends inside would be done up. A lawyer from Justice Now, the organization that Theresa Martinez helped found, met us by the vending-machine-card dispenser. She, too, was mainly dressed in black and gray, to avoid violating prison rules. A sign posted above the machine read:

No! Orange jumpsuit
No! Orange top and bottom
No! Blue chambray
No! Blue denim
No! Blue top and pants
No! Tan with green
No! Camouflage

Kushner views the relationships she has developed at Chowchilla as responsibilities, abiding even though her book is done. She helps her friends inside with their cases or with their writing, and sometimes sends them books. (She turned her friend Mychal Concepción, who is transitioning in prison, on to "Fat City" and "Jesus' Son.") "There are ethics to it," she told me. "One person is locked in a cage and the other is free." On her phone, she has Global Tel Link, a service that allows people on the outside to receive calls from prisoners. Someone calls her from Chowchilla just about every week.

As we followed a guard into a holding area enclosed by a metal fence and topped with razor wire, the lawyer whispered, "They can hear everything you say here. Don't talk about it till you're a mile away." The lawyer remarked wonderingly that feral rabbits somehow passed through all the fencing. Kushner said that her friend Liz Lozano, who had come to Chowchilla at twenty-one, soon after giving birth to a son, had tamed a rabbit and made it into a pet. "She even sewed it clothes," Kushner said. The guard, overhearing, said, "We got rid of the rabbits." Affronted, the lawyer whispered that they had also threatened to remove all the trees, because they provided cover for "homosexual," the prison's term for inmate sex.

Inside, the visitors' room was cinder block, with high ceilings; spherical cameras bulged like popped-out cartoon eyes in the corners of the room. Christy Phillips, a tiny woman in a blue top and pants, was escorted in by a guard. When she saw Kushner, she started bouncing on the toes of her white sneakers; squealing delightedly, she gave her a fierce hug.

Kushner has been especially invested in the stories of women who left the free world as children to spend the rest of their lives in prison. Now thirty-three, Phillips had gone to a sleepover when she was fifteen and had never been home again. When she was arrested, she repeatedly asked for her mother; the police said, Not now. A thirteen-year-old friend, arrested with her, went home with her mom that night and was never charged.

Phillips, accused of the drug-fuelled murder of an elderly woman, was one of the first minors to be charged as an adult, under legislation that passed in California when the idea of child "super-predators" was coming into vogue. During her trial, Phillips says, the prosecutor told the jury to forget that she looked like a skinny, cute kid and think of her as a "demon seed," born premature because she couldn't wait to get out of the womb and start killing people. Her sentence, two life terms plus an additional six years, was the inspiration for Romy's.

Phillips sat at a table with Kushner, facing the guard. Her arms were delicate and hashed with scars. She mentioned that she had been working on understanding her crime and the intensely abusive home she came from.

After a rough adjustment to prison, years when she couldn't stop crying, she is in the honor dorm and on the gardening committee.

"You have to keep your record perfect," Kushner told her. California has begun to change its approach to juveniles sentenced to life in prison, and Kushner has enlisted her college friend Mitch Kamin—a partner at Covington & Burling, where Eric Holder also works—to do pro-bono work on Phillips's behalf. The shifting legal landscape means that Phillips may go before a parole board many years sooner than she otherwise would have.

When we left Chowchilla, Kushner seemed depleted. She said that even her husband was perplexed that she had involved herself with the women in such a consuming and small-bore way. Why not use her prominence to advocate, writing op-eds for the newspaper? "It's not about me being a do-gooder," she said. "Nor is it about usurping the lives of people for my own gain. It's about caring about people whose life trajectories are totally different from my own and stepping out there so that our lives intersect."

On the long drive back to Los Angeles, we passed Pine Flat, a tiny town in the sequoias where a friend of Kushner's, an artist named James Benning, lives. During the years of prison visits, Kushner has often met up with him for fried shrimp at the Pyrenees, in Bakersfield, or stayed the night in Pine Flat. Going there is a release. She and Benning sit by the wood-burning stove, drink beer, talk about funny jobs they had as teen-agers and projects they're working on now.

Like Kushner, Benning learns by doing. Investigating outsider traditions and his own obsessions, he meticulously re-creates the works of earlier artists: Emily Dickinson's back-of-envelope poems, the paintings of a former Alabama slave named Bill Traylor. On his property, there is a pair of one-room cabins. One is a replica of Thoreau's. The other is a model of the cabin where the Unabomber plotted his attacks. Kushner walked me through the cabins, noting the precisely assembled details with a sense of affinity. To think about these people, to think *into* them, as she would say, Benning had to build their rooms with his bare hands. ♦



CAPTAIN'S LOG

BY MEGAN AMRAM

Day 1. After years of searching, my ship has finally found the unnamed planet just beyond our solar system which scientists believe may have supported life. We have named the planet XJ9358. Although it is currently irradiated and plagued with natural disasters, it may be a prospect for future colonization.

Day 7. Using fossils and other remains that we have discovered on the planet's ravaged surface, we have pieced together an idea of what XJ9358's dominant life-form, which we are calling Floribataneum R7, looked like. Imagine a spider, but with four powerful appendages sprouting from the thorax. Our preliminary hypothesis is that the creatures were green or blue, with long cartilaginous beaks. And they had only two eyes. Hideous, I know.

Day 11. We've learned more about Floribataneum R7. Based on their genetic material, the R7s probably lived about two hundred and seventy years, assuming that their understanding of nutrition was at least rudimentary. Interestingly, each R7 had between twenty-eight and thirty-two teeth, and all of the head fossils we examined seem to be smiling. These creatures must have been extremely happy and peaceful.

Day 16. We now understand why, throughout our history, we received no

transmissions from this planet: the inhabitants were extremely unsophisticated. They utilized fossil fuels and nuclear power, but wasted their solar energy and failed to employ methane dams to capture the nearly infinite power potential of flatulence. They apparently let the precious gases just dissipate into the air! Furthermore, they appeared to have many different languages and alphabets. The one in our current location uses twenty-six letters, except in a mysterious temple labelled "IKEA," where some of the letters have dots over them.

Day 39. Every venture out onto the planet's surface reveals more mysteries. My team came upon a low, fort-like building that houses hundreds of highly organized carbon structures. A sign on the building reads "Kay Jewellers." Owing to the unremarkable collection of carbon, we deduced that this place was at one point a garbage dump.

Day 61. Progress! I think I have started to understand some of the cultural touchstones of the R7s. It appears that they were a matriarchal people and prayed to a goddess. There are temples to this goddess scattered *everywhere*. She is half woman, half fish, and her name is Starbucks Coffee. She holds a fin in each hand, in an apparent show of omnipotent flexibility. Her ubiquity

suggests that she was highly respected. Based on this exalted standing, we can assume that the females of the R7 species were the rulers.

Day 92. I now see signs of the matriarchal tendency everywhere. Remnants of the culture's art and advertising indicate that the males were forced to cover up their bodies with bulky textiles, while the female form is generally displayed in the splendor of quasi nudity. Still, distinctions between genders and sexual proclivities appear murky. Some males appear to have been publicly shamed by being forced to wear a style of headgear called a "fedora." Researchers are still trying to crack the code. Luckily for the people on our planet, we have only one sexuality and body type: gay sphere.

Day 118. After having spent many days on XJ9358, I now understand the draw of Starbucks Coffee. The feeling that she instills in me is remarkable.

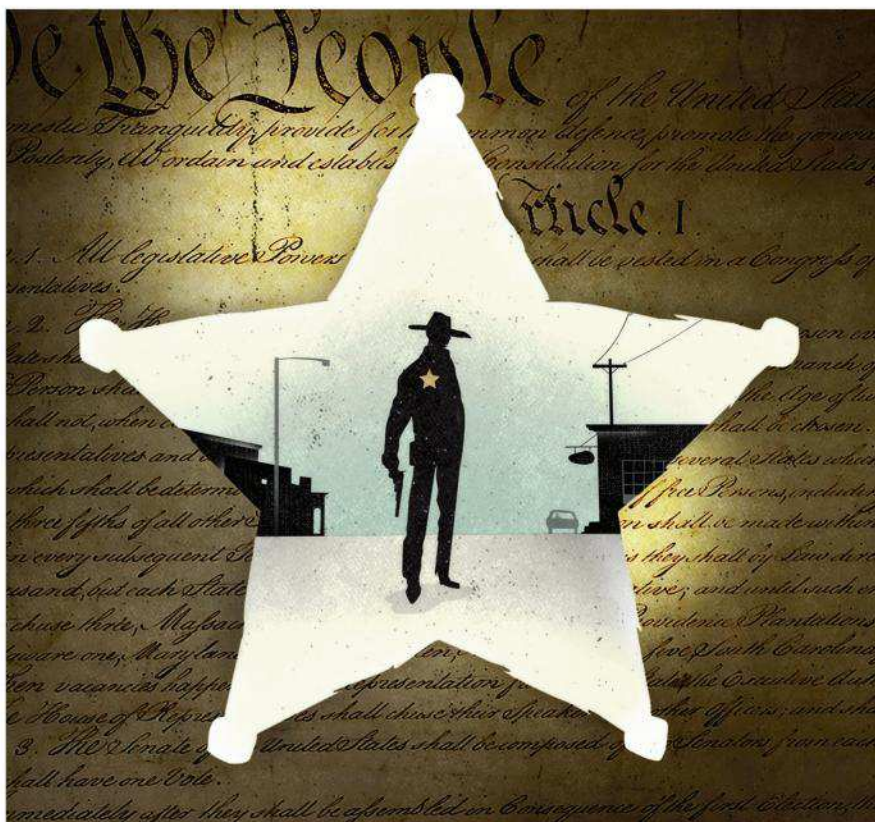
Day 147. I am smiling widely as I write this—I am in love! I have begun praying to Starbucks Coffee every day, telling her my fears and hopes for my people. Yesterday, when I went abroad on a general surveying mission, I left an offering to Starbucks Coffee. At the foot of her temple, I laid what I have concluded to be the treasures of this planet: a white rectangle decorated with the image of a piece of fruit with a bite taken out of it, a tiny pillow that says "Mustard," and a decorative length of metal tubing that I saw in nearly every house, called a "gun."

Day 205. My heart is breaking—my orders say that it is time for me to leave this place, and, with it, my darling Starbucks Coffee. The first survey of XJ9358 is complete, and, based on the information we have collected, it now tops the list of colonization targets for my people. I look forward to the day when I can return and walk among the fallen cities on my six appendages, smelling the air with each one of my noses, and remembering those who came before—who no longer seem as disgusting to me as they once did. May Starbucks Coffee have mercy on the souls who once called this place home. ♦

LONE STARS

A movement of sheriffs who say they are answerable only to the Constitution.

BY ASHLEY POWERS



Long tenures give sheriffs wide latitude to shape how the law is enforced.

On a Friday afternoon in March, 2013, a sheriff's sergeant named Jody Hoagland noticed a red Nissan pickup truck drifting off a road. Hoagland was two hours into his shift patrolling Liberty County, Florida, eight hundred square miles of the state's Panhandle. He had just come from a small shed fire, and was driving through the Apalachicola National Forest, which carpets the southern half of the county in longleaf pines. Two-lane roads meander past grazing cows, Baptist churches ("Good News: Jesus Loves You"), Confederate flags, and roadside stands peddling stink bait. Signs of humankind vanish, save for the solitary roadside mailbox. You live here because you want to be left alone.

Hoagland signalled the truck to pull over. A scruffy bearded man was driv-

ing and a blond woman was in the passenger seat. A silver .357 revolver lay between them. Two Chihuahuas barked excitedly. Hoagland asked the man, whose name was Floyd Parrish, to get out of the truck, and noticed a bulge in his right jeans pocket—a Titan .25-calibre handgun, it turned out, with one round in the chamber and the safety off. Parrish didn't have a permit to carry a concealed weapon. It was easy to get one—all you had to do was take a class and pay a fee. Hoagland arrested Parrish and drove him to the county jail. Not long afterward, the sheriff, Nick Finch, called.

Finch had been Liberty's sheriff for less than three months. He first decided to run for the job during a garage sale, after a customer locked her keys in her car and Finch called the sheriff's office

for help. There was only one deputy on the road, he was told, and the deputy was tied up in a funeral procession. Finch, who was raised on a farm in Iowa, had spent close to two decades in the Army and in the Air Force Reserve, so he was fluent in the language of God and country. White-haired and blue-eyed, with a meaty build, he was appealing to voters, and was helped by the fact that his wife's family had lived in the area for generations.

Liberty County, with eighty-seven hundred residents, is the state's second least populous. It is whiter, poorer, and less well educated than Florida as a whole. Timber has long been the chief industry, though the federal government has slowed logging in recent decades to protect the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker. One local told me, "The saying goes, 'In Liberty County, if you run out of toilet tissue try a woodpecker.'" A number of side roads bear the names of residents; when I visited recently, I drove down Jimmy Lee Drive and ran into the actual Jimmy Lee. The closest thing to a community history, "The Heritage of Liberty County, Florida," has entries on the region's tupelo honey; homecoming queens; and worm grunting, or coaxing worms out of the earth with a wooden stake and a metal strip. Several pages are devoted to a theory that the Apalachicola River's east bank was the original Garden of Eden.

Liberty's sheriff and his dozen or so deputies are the only law-enforcement agents in the county. As in much of rural America, the sheriff is far more than an administrator. He's an aspirational figure and a moral touchstone. Eddie Joe White, the current sheriff, told me, "There's no way to define the parameters of sheriff. From one day to the next, you're a fireman, you're a paramedic, you're a grief counsellor. You can't back away from any responsibility and say it's not your job, because, as sheriff, you are responsible for everything as it deals with humanity."

Finch won the election on his second try, in 2012, just after his fiftieth birthday. Before taking office, he went online to research his new position. Finch is conservative, and the sites he visited argued that the sheriff, in his county, is more powerful than the Pres-

ident. That argument was consistent with the beliefs of Finch's law-enforcement hero, Joe Arpaio, the former Arizona sheriff who last year was convicted of defying a court order to stop the racial profiling of Latinos. "I like Joe, because Joe's a lot like me," Finch told me. "He doesn't take shit from nobody. He knows what his role is, and come hell or high water, he was going to do what he thought was right." On Facebook, Finch posted a Breitbart story, about a sheriff named Denny Peyman, headlined "Kentucky Sheriff to Obama: No Gun Control in My County."

There are roughly three thousand sheriffs in America, in forty-seven states. Arpaio and Peyman are among the dozens aligned with the "constitutional sheriffs" movement. Another is David A. Clarke, Jr., the cowboy-hatted Wisconsin firebrand who considered joining the Department of Homeland Security. (He now works at America First Action, a pro-Trump political-action committee.) There are even more followers of constitutional policing across America among law enforcement's rank and file. One group, the Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association, or C.S.P.O.A., claims about five thousand members.

C.S.P.O.A. members believe that the sheriff has the final say on a law's constitutionality in his county. Every law-enforcement officer has some leeway in choosing which laws to enforce, which is why it's rare to get a ticket for jaywalking, for example. But, under this philosophy, the supremacy clause of the Constitution, which dictates that federal law takes precedence over state law, is irrelevant. So is the Supreme Court. "They get up every morning and put their clothes on the same way you and I do," Finch told me. "Why do those nine people get to decide what the rest of the country's going to be like?" To the most dogmatic, there's only one way to interpret the country's founding documents: pro-gun, anti-immigrant, anti-regulation, anti-Washington.

Finch was on the way to Dirty Dick's Crab House with his wife when he started getting calls about the arrest. (If you are a rural sheriff, everyone has your cell-phone number.) After speaking with Hoagland, he drove to the

county jail, where Parrish, a former logger, told his version of the arrest. He and his partner, Sherry Chumney, lived in a wooden house on forty acres of land, a half mile down a dirt road, past a barricade of tangled brush and two "No Trespassing" signs. Parrish carried the .357 revolver in case he came across an unfriendly panther or bear. He carried his small gun because he had a chronic lung disease; if he felt woozy, he fired it, and Chumney rushed over with his inhaler. That afternoon, Parrish said, he had driven to his brother's place and forgotten that the small gun was in his pocket.

Finch listened to the story, and then told him, "Fortunately for you, young man, I'm a believer in the Second Amendment." He let Parrish go, a practice that people in Liberty call getting "unarrested."

Since its inception, in ninth-century England—when the sheriff was called the shire reeve, or county guardian—the office has been a kind of one-man government. The first sheriffs were appointed by the king, and charged with collecting taxes, investigating deaths, and commanding the posse comitatus, a gang of locals dispatched to hunt fugitives. (In Latin, the term means "the force of the county.") The British brought the idea with them to America, where the office took on the characteristics of its new home. In 1652, when Virginia's royal governor told each county to choose a sheriff, Northampton County let its voters decide.

Nearly every American county still has an elected sheriff. Over time, cities established police forces, which diminished the office's power in the densely populated Northeast. (In 2000, Connecticut eliminated the post entirely.) But in the South and in the West, where many counties are far larger than in Eastern states, the sheriff ties together isolated communities. He is Andy Taylor, from "The Andy Griffith Show," and Little Bill Daggett, from "Unforgotten." Southerners call him the "high sheriff." Almost every American sheriff is a white man. He's more likely to come from the place he serves than a police chief is, and his deputies are intimately involved in everyday life. Casey LaFrance, an associate professor at West-

ern Illinois University who studies law enforcement, told me, "The sheriff's the one that's going to tell me I'm getting divorced if I don't know it, or tell me I have eight days to leave my house."

In most states, including Florida, the sheriff's office is written into the state constitution. Once a sheriff is elected, he can usually be removed only by a governor or by the voters. His average tenure is twenty-four years. "Once you become the sheriff, you're likely to remain the sheriff until you retire or die," LaFrance said. This gives sheriffs wide latitude to shape how the law is enforced. According to research by the political scientists Mirya Holman and Emily Farris, sheriffs who believe myths about abused women—for instance, that they can easily leave their abusers—are less likely to demand the mandatory arrest of domestic-violence suspects. Similarly, sheriffs critical of immigrants are more likely to order deputies to check a driver's immigration status during a routine traffic stop. Holman, an associate professor at Tulane University, said that many sheriffs believe, "I'm this independent man that has control over this, and no one can tell me what to do."

The idea of a constitutional sheriff emerged in the nineteen-seventies, in California. It was first proposed by William Potter Gale, who had been an aide to General Douglas MacArthur. According to Daniel Levitas's book, "The Terrorist Next Door," Gale embraced a belief system called Christian Identity, and, as a self-styled minister, preached that the Constitution was a divinely inspired document intended to elevate whites above Jews and racial minorities. From his Ministry of Christ Church, outside Yosemite National Park, where he sermonized in front of a giant Confederate flag, Gale produced a newsletter, "IDENTITY," its name reflecting his ideology and his fondness for unnecessary capitalization. In 1971, he mailed Vol. 6, No. 1, to his flock. Its featured story, written by Gale, appeared under the byline of Colonel Ben Cameron, a character in the film "The Birth of a Nation" who helps found the Ku Klux Klan. Gale railed against civil-rights laws, the income tax, the United Nations, and the showering of tax dollars on foreign allies. He believed that

a conservative posse comitatus offered a solution:

In the formation of this Constitutional Republic, the COUNTY was—and remains the seat of power for the People. The county Sheriff is the ONLY LEGAL LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICER IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA! The Sheriff can mobilize all men between the ages of 18 and 45 who are in good health and not in the Federal military service. Others can VOLUNTEER, women included. This body of citizens is the SHERIFF'S POSSE. All of them serve when called by the Sheriff. The title of this body is POSSE COMITATUS.

Gale was writing not long after Bull Connor, the public-safety commissioner in Birmingham, Alabama, had turned dogs and fire hoses on nonviolent protesters. His innovation was to wrap his rants in constitutionalism and legalese, a tactic intended to make them sound legitimate. Michael Barkun, who has written extensively about the radical right, told me that Gale's message was, "We know what the law really means. It's all those lawyers who have erected a kind of apparatus of deception."

By the early nineteen-eighties, Gale's dogma, in the form of the Posse Comitatus movement, had taken hold in the Midwestern farm belt, which was reeling from a foreclosure crisis. A sympathizer who ran Cattle Country Broadcasting, in Dodge City, Kansas, played Gale's screeds nightly. "The law is that your citizens—a posse—will hang an official who violated the law and the

Constitution," Gale said in the summer of 1982. "Take him to the most populated intersection of the township and at noon hang him by the neck." Poses had formed in nearly half the country. Some convened their own "common law" grand juries and "indicted" officials for ostensibly failing to uphold their oaths of office. A few turned violent. Posse members assaulted an I.R.S. agent in Wisconsin, tried to "arrest" a cop in Idaho, and nearly provoked a shoot-out in a California tomato field.

The movement's violent side was eventually its downfall. In 1983, authorities in North Dakota tried to arrest a Posse acolyte named Gordon Kahl, a mechanic who had violated probation in a tax-evasion case, and two U.S. marshals died in the ensuing standoff. Kahl went into hiding for four months, and then was killed in a second gun battle, in Arkansas, along with a local sheriff. Although some Posse members rebranded themselves Christian Patriots, it was too late. A few years later, Gale was convicted of mailing death threats to a judge and to I.R.S. agents. When he died, in 1988, the movement was fading from prominence. His vision of sheriff supremacy, however, persisted.

After Sheriff Finch released Floyd Parrish, Sergeant Hoagland couldn't let the incident go. "The more I just sat there and stewed on it, steamed on it, it just ate away at me," Hoagland

told me. He had no problem with guns; he hunted gators, deer, turkeys, and squirrels. But he suspected that Finch was doing a political favor. Hoagland wasn't the only deputy suspicious of Finch. The sheriff's experience was mostly in the military and in state agencies, not in small-town policing. When I met Mark Mallory, a former lieutenant at the office, he handed me paperwork from four incidents that he believed Finch had mishandled. Other former deputies recalled a botched attempted arrest in which Finch told the man detained, "I'm fucking God in this county." (Finch told me that he didn't remember the incident, and added, "I'm a Christian, and I would never compare myself to God.")

Hoagland started looking for another job, and two months after the Parrish incident a nearby fire department offered him full-time work. On his last day at the sheriff's office, Hoagland called an inspector at the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, a state agency that investigates misconduct by public officials. Three days later, he travelled to F.D.L.E. headquarters, in Tallahassee, for a taped interview. He told inspectors that he had kept a copy of the paperwork from Parrish's arrest but that when Tim Partridge, another deputy, went to retrieve the jail copy it was missing. Partridge also checked the logbook for Parrish's name, and found that someone had whited it out.

Eleven days later, a friend tipped Finch off that his arrest was imminent. Finch, who was at the sheriff's office, went home and changed into a blue shirt and jeans so that reporters couldn't take an arrest photo of him in uniform. When he got back to the office, F.D.L.E. officials were waiting for him. An inspector read him Executive Order 13-140, in which Rick Scott, the Republican governor, suspended him from office. "I thought, This is crazy. I haven't done anything wrong," Finch told me. The headline in the *Calhoun-Liberty Journal* read "Sheriff Arrested for Official Misconduct." In the next issue, the paper listed him in the police blotter alongside men arrested on suspicion of domestic battery and armed robbery.

Shortly after the arrest, Finch got a phone call from Richard Mack, who



"I wanted stalagmites, but Erk here is a stalactite nut."

had followed news of the arrest from his Arizona home. Mack said that he was the founder of the Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association. In Finch, he saw a fellow-patriot, and he wanted to help.

One day last fall, Mack bounded to the front of a school lecture hall in suburban Phoenix. At sixty-four, he has dark hair and a grandfatherly charm. The night before, I'd met him at a mall where, for exercise, he likes to ascend the descending escalators. This morning, he was proselytizing to about three dozen people at his group's Oath of Office Training, one of several workshops that it puts on across the country each year.

The workshop was held in a white room draped with six American flags and a canary-yellow Gadsden flag, reading "DON'T TREAD ON ME," which was a mainstay of Trump and Tea Party rallies. "We have a moral responsibility to obey just laws, and we have a moral responsibility not to obey unjust laws," Mack told the audience of mostly older white men, echoing Martin Luther King, Jr. "Who decides? The person who takes the oath decides." There were murmurs of approval.

The crowd was a cross-section of today's anti-government right: a retired male cop fed up with "Antifa nonsense," a retired female cop concerned about "the jihadi threat," an elderly couple afraid of "the conspiracy to put us into world governance." Another man told me that the world is controlled by the Vatican, the District of Columbia, and the Queen of England, then handed me seven stapled pieces of paper and promised, "It's gonna make your eyes fall out of your head." It was an indictment issued by a common-law grand jury, one of William Potter Gale's innovations.

In the eighties and nineties, Mack served two terms as the sheriff of Graham County, Arizona. One of his influences was the Salt Lake City police chief and author W. Cleon Skousen, who believed that the Founders were God's disciples and the Constitution a Christian document. As a young officer, Mack had attended one of Skousen's workshops. "That man spoke with the power of angels," he told me.

In 1994, Mack and a Montana sheriff

named Jay Printz sued the federal government over a provision of the Brady Bill, a gun-control measure that would have temporarily required sheriffs to run background checks on gun buyers. As the case worked its way to the U.S. Supreme Court, Mack became a hero of the burgeoning militia movement, a collection of anti-government paramilitary groups that descended from Posse ideology. His status was bolstered after the Court ruled in the sheriffs' favor, in *Printz v. United States*, in 1997. Each person at the Arizona workshop received a booklet dissecting the case, which, on the cover, had been renamed "Mack/Printz v. USA."

As the decade wore on, the militia movement lost momentum, and Mack's speaking gigs dried up. He worked as the public-relations director of Gun Owners of America, the N.R.A.'s more strident cousin. He also sold cars, ran for the U.S. Senate as a Libertarian, and was a contestant on the sole season of the Showtime reality series "American Candidate." Disgruntlement with the Presidency of Barack Obama, and the dismal economy of the late aughts, helped revive anti-government fervor, and, along with it, Mack's influence. In 2009, he self-published "The County Sheriff: America's Last Hope," a fifty-page manifesto with a sheriff's star on the front and an endorsement from Arpaio on the back. "There is a man who can stop the abuse, end the tyranny, and restore the Constitution, once again, as the supreme law of the land," he writes. "Yes, it is you SHERIFF!" Mack said that he sold a hundred thousand copies of the book.

By this time, sheriff supremacy had cross-pollinated with other kinds of right-wing thought, resulting, for example, in the county-supremacy movement, in which dozens of counties adopted ordinances claiming control over federal land. Each repackaging of the idea helped to slightly shift the broader public's perception of what constitutes normal governance. This is how fringe ideas work. In a recent study published in the journal *Political Behavior*, participants were given a list of ways to address a divisive policy issue, such as

immigration. Participants whose lists included either radically conservative positions (ban immigrants entirely) or radically liberal positions (accept all immigrants) were more likely to recalibrate their view of what the centrist stance was. Matthew N. Lyons, the author of the upcoming book "Insurgent Supremacists," told me that this is how the extreme right wields

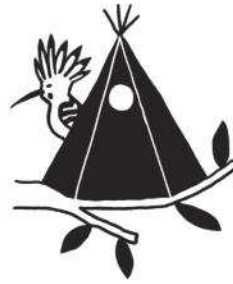
power without holding office. "Their notion of political change is based on shifting the parameters of the political culture as a precondition for transforming institutions," he said.

When Mack launched the C.S.P.O.A., around 2010, he described it as

"the army to set our nation free." He recruited supporters, in part, by playing to sheriffs' Second Amendment ardor. (In Holman and Farris's survey of sheriffs, ninety-five per cent said that defending gun rights was more important than restricting access to firearms.) After the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre, and the subsequent push in Washington for gun control, Mack published a list that eventually included almost five hundred sheriffs who, in his words, "have vowed to uphold and defend the Constitution against Obama's unconstitutional gun control measures." (Several sheriffs later said that Mack had added them without their knowledge.) One Tennessee sheriff told the Southern Poverty Law Center, "If you come in here trying to take up the guns, it's not going to be a nice day for somebody."

Mack told me that he has spoken at more than a hundred and twenty-five rallies. Many supporters were also Skousenites, because the conservative commentator Glenn Beck routinely touted Skousen's books. At C.S.P.O.A. workshops, everyone gets a Mad Libs-style workbook based on Skousen's "The Making of America." Speakers emphasize the Second Amendment, the Fourth (searches and seizures), and the Tenth (states' rights). They portray officers as arbiters of morality and justice.

Mack personally disavows discrimination and infuses his lectures with the language of the civil-rights era. He



likes to say, “We should have never heard of Rosa Parks,” explaining that a constitutional sheriff wouldn’t have arrested her. Yet, according to his ideology, a sheriff could, for example, reject the Fourteenth Amendment, which granted citizenship and rights to former slaves. (Mack described such a scenario as a “hypothetical,” and said, “I don’t do hypotheticals. I deal with what’s real.”) A speaker at one C.S.P.O.A. event I attended, an attorney, encouraged us to memorize the chorus of a song he’d written:

No matter what they told you all
Courts and judges cannot make law
The case law method has a fatal flaw
Because courts cannot make law.

Mack brought Finch’s case to the attention of the conservative media. Within days of Finch’s arrest, the conspiracy theorist Alex Jones was floating the notion on his Web site, Infowars, that the case was an example of political persecution. An Infowars contributor said that Finch had won office as a nonpartisan candidate, “which to me is probably why you had a Republican governor sic his minions on this constitutional-following sheriff, because he owes his allegiance to no one.” Soon Mack called into the Infowars talk show and raised the possibility that Finch’s suspension was the result of an attempted coup. “That’s very common, to have enemies within,” he said.

Amid the flurry of coverage, a radio host named Burnie Thompson invited Finch on his afternoon show, on Talk Radio 101. Thompson prided himself on his independent thinking. “I’m not one of these—what do they call them?—whatever, these fringe groups,” Thompson told me. “I’m a pretty mainstream guy. I’m an Air Force captain. I got a master’s in journalism.” Still, he was impressed by Finch’s certainty that he’d done nothing wrong. After the interview, he read Mack’s book about constitutional sheriffs and became a convert. During the next few months, he interviewed Finch around a dozen times, helped him raise money for his defense, and asked a listener to record a song about the case to the tune of Bob Marley’s “I Shot the Sheriff,” replacing “shot” with “saved.”

Thompson told me that, in a bid to

get Finch’s case thrown out, he had met with Governor Scott and his general counsel, Peter Antonacci. Thompson shared a theory with them, gleaned in part from Mack’s book, that a sheriff can do whatever he wants in his own jail. Antonacci repeatedly told him that there was no legal precedent for this theory. “I’m thinking, His chief counsel believes that?” Thompson said. “You know that feeling when you go, ‘Oh, my God, the world’s not what I thought it was?’” (Neither Antonacci nor Scott’s office responded to multiple requests for comment.)

In addition to official misconduct, a third-degree felony, Finch was charged with falsifying public records, a misdemeanor. Jack Campbell, the prosecutor in the case, told me, “To me, it was always a public-records case. If you want to stop enforcing a law, O.K., I guess you can. You can fire all your deputies and just sit over there in your office all day, if that’s what you want to do.” He continued, “But you’re the sheriff: you can’t hide and not tell people what you’re doing.”

Finch’s trial started just before Halloween. By then, his Facebook page had more likes than there are residents in Liberty County, and his defense fund had raised almost fifteen thousand dollars. “Somebody even sent me money from Australia,” Finch told me. There had been three rallies in three towns, the last in front of the Liberty County courthouse. More than a hundred people, some in American-flag shirts or scarves, strung up a Gadsden flag, set out lawn chairs and coolers, and waved signs: “When injustice becomes law, resistance becomes duty”; “Protect our Constitution”; “Nick Finch, the people’s sheriff.” One woman had strung a container of Bic Cover-it correction fluid around her neck, a nod to how Floyd Parrish’s name had vanished from the jail records.

On the day Finch testified, the mood in the Liberty courthouse was as electric as the opening night of a play. Mack had flown in from Arizona. Reporters came from Tallahassee. Finch wore a dark jacket, a blue dotted tie, and beige slacks. On his right lapel was a tiny American-flag pin.

“Sheriff Finch,” Campbell said,

“do you think you’re above the law?”
“No, sir.”

“Do you think your judgment trumps everybody else’s in the court system?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Do you believe that you had the authority as a constitutional sheriff to do away with this case, on your own authority?” Campbell asked.

“Absolutely,” Finch replied.

The case against Finch was mostly circumstantial. The jailer who’d been on duty that night testified that the sheriff walked out of the building with Parrish’s file. “Now, whether it’s under his bed at the house, or it’s out in the woods, or it’s in the shredder in a burn pit, it doesn’t make a hell of a difference. It’s not where it belongs,” Campbell told the jury. No one admitted to whitening out Parrish’s name in the jail records, though investigators had a lab analyze the splotches, which proved that someone had. “The fact is,” Campbell argued, “that the sheriff told this jury that he believes that his discretion allows him to decide which laws he’s going to follow and which laws he’s not. Ladies and gentlemen, if he’s going to break the law concerning carry-and-conceal firearms, how are we to believe that he won’t break the one for perjury in this trial?”

The jury deliberated for about an hour, and found Finch not guilty on both counts. Finch hugged everyone within reach, made a few remarks to the TV scrum outside the courthouse, and then called Alex Jones, who told his audience, “He needs to be the next governor—I’m telling you right now—of Florida. It’s these type of men that stand up for the Constitution that are going to save this country.”

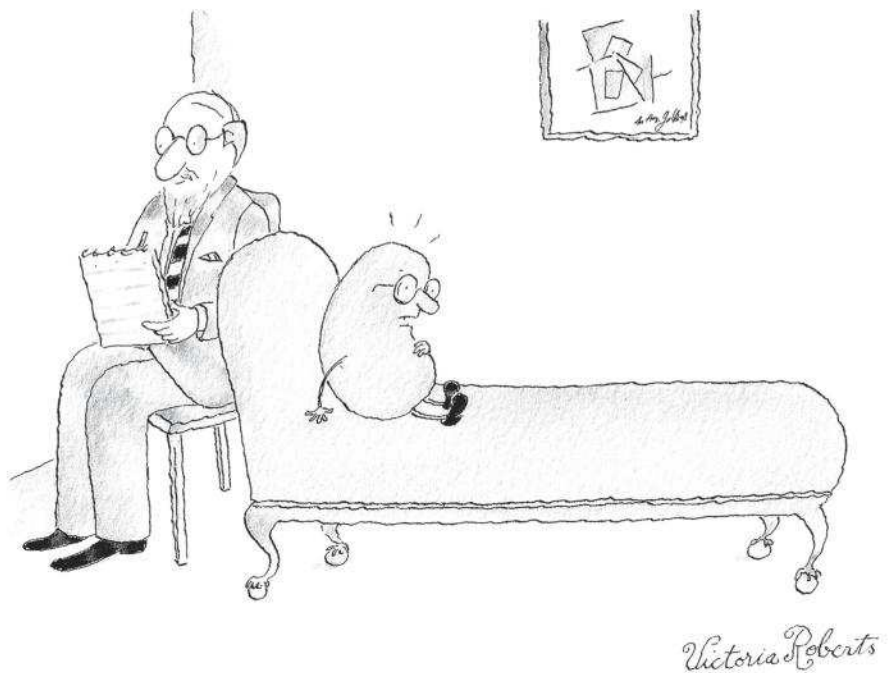
Finch, reinstated, sued the county for attorneys’ fees and won about a hundred and sixty thousand dollars. The rest of his term was less triumphant. He fought with county commissioners over his budget. Three female employees sued him—two alleging gender discrimination in the department and one that he had sexually harassed her. Finch settled with all three. Trump’s emergence as a Presidential front-runner was a rare bright spot for Finch, who said he was among the first sheriffs in Florida to endorse him. Finch got to meet the future President at a rally in Tampa.

"You know what?" he told me. "I look at Trump and I see myself. Because this guy is getting the shit beat out of him from Day One."

Finch ran for reelection in 2016. His chief opponent was Eddie Joe White, who was related to three previous Liberty County sheriffs, including one who was shot and killed in the line of duty in 1919. White chose a pointed campaign slogan: "It's time we restore the trust." Finch's ads touted him as "Your Constitutional Sheriff," but he and his wife, the Liberty County native, had divorced, and he knew this would count against him. Late one night about a month and a half before the election, Floyd Parrish and an acquaintance got into an argument. According to Parrish, the man, drunk and threatening, lunged at him, and he had no choice but to shoot. The man died. A deputy called Finch in the middle of the night to relay the news. Finch told me he thought, "Jesus. I'm done. There's the election." He lost the sheriff's race, earning only six per cent of the vote.

For the constitutional-sheriffs movement, however, Finch's defeat didn't matter. The C.S.P.O.A. named him Sheriff of the Year in 2014, and Mack mentioned the trial in his book "Are You a David?" (The government is Goliath.) The movement's ideas have now spread far beyond a few renegade sheriffs. In Nevada, for example, members of the Bundy family have emerged as leaders of a movement to wrest control of public lands from Washington. During an armed standoff on the ranch of the family patriarch, Cliven Bundy, which drew anti-government crowds from around the country, including several constitutional sheriffs, Bundy demanded that his local sheriff disarm federal authorities. The sheriff refused. Earlier this year, after charges against Bundy related to the standoff were dismissed, Bundy said to a TV reporter, "I think we're going to protest the county sheriff: 'Why didn't you do your job?'"

In 2015, a Nevada lawmaker introduced a bill to give sheriffs veto power over some federal law-enforcement activities. Last year, in Washington, D.C., Jason Chaffetz, at that time a U.S. representative from Utah, introduced a bill that would, in practice, transfer law-



"It's always 'The humble lima bean this, and the humble lima bean that.'"

enforcement responsibilities to sheriffs on certain public lands. Soon after Trump took office, he met with representatives of the National Sheriffs' Association, including a sheriff from Pennsylvania who had served on C.S.P.O.A.'s advisory council, and one from North Carolina who had ties to the group. That summer, Trump pardoned Joe Arpaio, who is now running for the U.S. Senate in Arizona. A few years back, when Mack visited D.C. to decry the Obama Administration's immigration measures, only three lawmakers met with him. One was Jeff Sessions, now the Attorney General. Ryan Lenz, a senior investigative reporter at the Southern Poverty Law Center, told me that "the migration of these ideas to the mainstream primed the election for Trump." Trump's election, in turn, "finalized the migration."

I met Finch one night in December at a McDonald's in Blountstown, Florida. We sat at a table near the window, the restaurant wreathed for the holiday. Finch was working as a long-haul trucker and had just finished a trip to South Carolina. He wore a Harley-Davidson T-shirt and a "Thin Blue Line" baseball cap; its insignia, an American flag with a single blue

stripe, honors police. He recounted his time as sheriff, and when he got to the trial he stopped and shook his head. Occasionally, he strayed into national politics, asking, "How in the hell does Hillary Clinton get to lie, cheat, steal, and probably kill, and nobody cares?" As we talked, a former deputy stopped at our table and said, "What's going on, Sheriff?" Finch responded with a pained smile.

Finch remains a powerful symbol for constitutional sheriffs. The day after Trump's Inauguration, under a gray, drizzling sky, I drove to an Embassy Suites near the Baltimore airport for a C.S.P.O.A. training workshop. While I waited at a table in the lobby for my packet—and my black-and-gold lanyard that said I was part of the "posse"—a group of pink pussy-hatted women passed by, on their way to the Women's March in Washington. In a conference room, the C.S.P.O.A. audience flipped through their "Making of America" booklets. Mack wasn't there, but, via a video monitor, he introduced Finch as a sheriff whose "strong stand for freedom" had cost him his badge. Finch stood up, put his hand over his heart, and led the room in the Pledge of Allegiance. ♦

McMASTER AND COMMANDER

Can a national-security adviser retain his integrity if the President has none?

BY PATRICK RADDEN KEEFE

When Donald Trump had a phone conversation with Vladimir Putin on the morning of March 20th, the two were at an excruciatingly delicate juncture. American intelligence officials had concluded that Russia had interfered in the 2016 Presidential election, with the goal of helping Trump win, and Trump had become the subject of an investigation, by the special counsel Robert Mueller, into allegations of collusion between the Kremlin and the Trump campaign. On March 4th, a former Russian spy and his daughter had been poisoned with a military-grade nerve agent in the English city of Salisbury. Theresa May, the British Prime Minister, announced that the Russian state appeared to be responsible and expelled twenty-three Russian diplomats from the U.K.

Before a phone call to a foreign leader, American Presidents are normally supplied with talking points prepared by staffers at the National Security Council, which is housed in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, next to the White House. Because conversations between heads of state can range widely, such materials are usually very detailed. But Trump, as a senior Administration official recently put it, is “not a voracious reader.”

The National Security Council has a comparatively lean budget—approximately twelve million dollars—and so its staff consists largely of career professionals on loan from the State Department, the Pentagon, and other agencies. When Trump assumed office, N.S.C. staffers initially generated memos for him that resembled those produced for his predecessors: multi-page explanations of policy and strategy. But “an edict came down,” a former staffer told me: “Thin it out.” The staff dutifully trimmed the memos to a single page. “But then word comes back: ‘This is still too much.’” A senior Trump aide

explained to the staffers that the President is “a visual person,” and asked them to express points “pictorially.”

“By the time I left, we had these cards,” the former staffer said. They are long and narrow, made of heavy stock, and emblazoned with the words “THE WHITE HOUSE” at the top. Trump receives a thick briefing book every night, but nobody harbors the illusion that he reads it. Current and former officials told me that filling out a card is the best way to raise an issue with him in writing. Everything that needs to be conveyed to the President must be boiled down, the former staffer said, to “two or three points, with the syntactical complexity of ‘See Jane run.’”

Given Trump’s avowed admiration for despots, and the curious deference that he has shown Putin, his staff was worried about the March 20th phone call. Putin had recently been elected to another six-year term, but American officials did not regard the election as legitimate. Staffers were concerned that Trump might nevertheless salute Putin on his sham victory. When briefers prepared a card for the call, one of the bullet points said, in capital letters: “DO NOT CONGRATULATE.”

Trump also received a five-minute oral briefing from his national-security adviser, Lieutenant General Herbert Raymond McMaster, who goes by H.R. Before McMaster delivered the briefing, one of his aides said to him, “The President is going to congratulate him no matter what you say.”

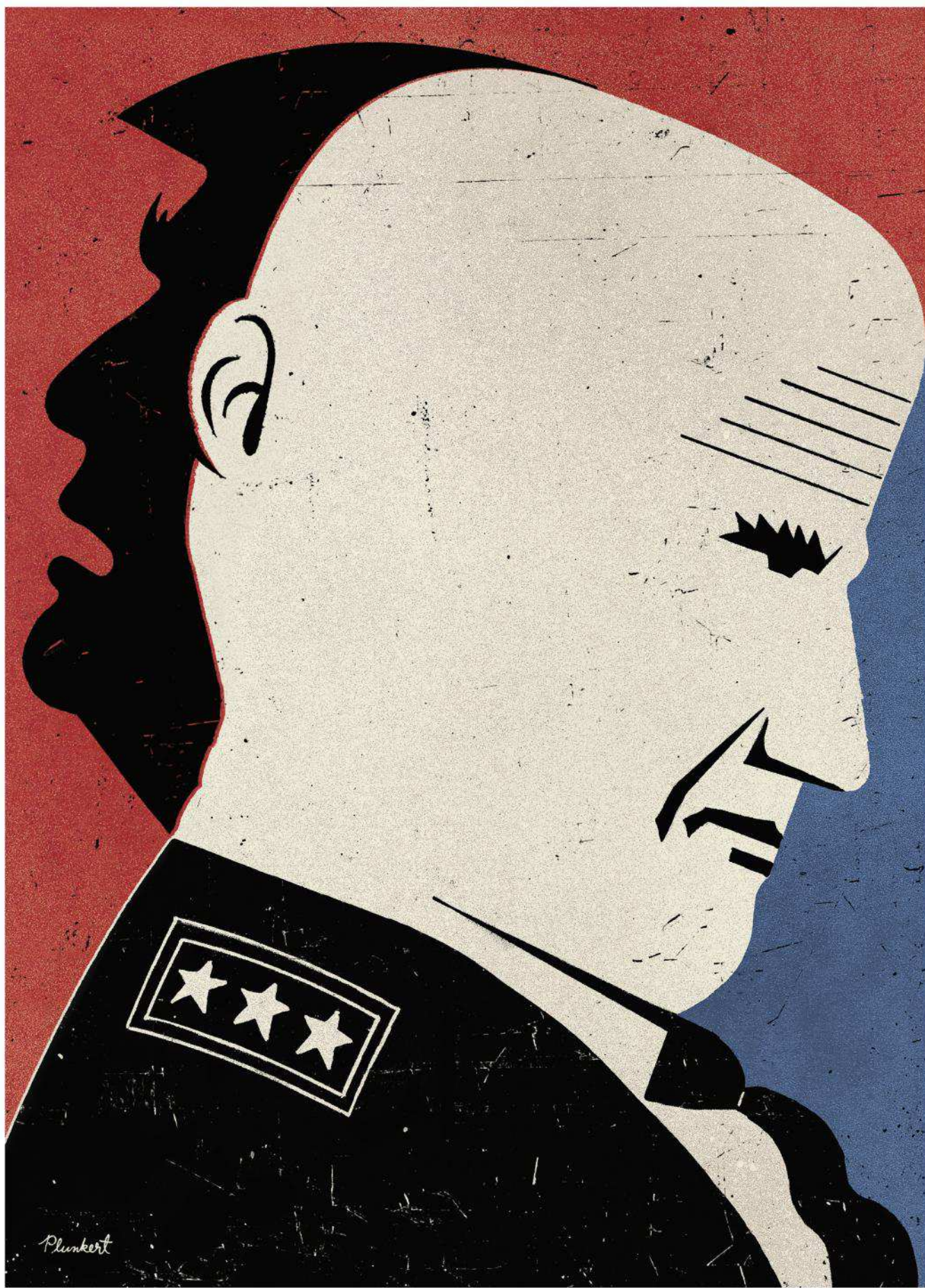
“I know,” McMaster replied.

Trump takes pride in being impervious to the advice of experts, and he had no personal affection for his national-security adviser. McMaster, who had learned to pick his battles, chose not to raise the matter of Putin’s election. The President took the call alone in the White House residence, but McMaster was listening in on a so-called drop line. Sure

enough, Trump did not read or did not heed the briefing card, and congratulated Putin.

Watching a beleaguered Trump appointee struggle to hang on to his job can feel like watching a tipsy cowboy on a bucking mechanical bull. By the standard set by his predecessor, Michael Flynn—who lasted all of twenty-four days—McMaster was a survivor, having kept his position for more than a year. “H.R. is relentlessly positive,” a senior official who worked closely with him told me, but his ride with Trump had been bruising. McMaster, a decorated war hero, has joked to friends that his combat experiences compare favorably with his tour of duty at the White House. Trump’s combination of bullheaded ignorance and counter-suggestibility makes him singularly difficult to counsel. Before the President asked McMaster to become his national-security adviser, he had offered the position to a retired vice admiral, Robert Harward, who turned it down, reportedly saying to friends that the job was “a shit sandwich.”

But McMaster is “something of a Boy Scout,” a friend of his told me, and he accepted the offer. Much has been written about Trump’s infatuation with the men he calls “my generals,” and what his fetishization of military commanders might indicate about his autocratic tendencies or his sense of masculine inadequacy. There may be a more pragmatic explanation, though, for Trump’s preference: he has struggled to fill his Administration with experienced professionals. Many eligible Republicans disqualified themselves by publicly expressing misgivings about Trump’s suitability for the Presidency. Others just didn’t have the stomach for a shit sandwich. But the military prides itself on not being political, and officers tend not to have spoken publicly about their impressions of Trump. “The professional code of the military officer prohibits him or her from



McMaster realized that, during briefings, Trump “wasn’t absorbing a fucking thing he said,” a friend reported.



"No, the other one. Next to the spoons."

engaging in political activity," McMaster once wrote. Moreover, the military cultivates a sense of duty. Bill Rapp, a retired Army general who has been friends with McMaster for thirty-eight years, told me, "For a military officer, when the President says, 'I need you to do something,' there is only one answer."

It was easy to see why Trump had settled on McMaster, who had an impeccable reputation as a warrior-intellectual: in addition to excelling in combat, he had written a Ph.D. dissertation that became a landmark book, *"Dereliction of Duty,"* which was published in 1997. It chronicles the failures of President Lyndon Johnson's military advisers during the Vietnam War. McMaster describes Johnson as "a profoundly insecure man who craved and demanded affirmation," and notes that Johnson—who came into office after the assassination of John F. Kennedy—suffered from a sense of illegitimacy, a fear that he was "an illegal usurper." McMaster points out that Johnson had "a real propensity for lying," and that he surrounded himself with "advisers who would tell him what he wanted to hear." The book's title refers to the reluctance of military advisers to offer Johnson unvarnished assessments of the war's progress. McMaster argues that they should not have allowed themselves to be politicized, sanctioning the lies that the

Johnson Administration told the public.

Two days after Trump's phone call with Putin, he fired McMaster. Someone in the Administration had leaked the "DO NOT CONGRATULATE" story to the *Washington Post*, and Trump was furious. Yet McMaster's ouster had seemed imminent for months. As it turned out, Trump found the intellectual side of the warrior-intellectual annoying. When McMaster took the job, he had promised to "work tirelessly" to protect "the interests of the American people," but the challenges he faced were unprecedented. What does it mean to be the national-security adviser when some of the greatest threats confronting the nation may be the proclivities and limitations of the President himself? McMaster's friend Eliot Cohen, who was a senior official in the George W. Bush Administration, told me that, although they have not spoken about the general's motives, he thinks McMaster may have believed that he was "defending the country, to some extent, from the President."

There is nobility in such an effort—but also danger. For any Trump appointee, Cohen suggested, "the challenges to your integrity will not come when the President points at a crib and says, 'Strangle that baby'—it'll be much more incremental than that." In order to keep the job, friends warned, McMaster might

be forced to mortgage his integrity for a feckless politician, just like the Johnson advisers he had so scathingly criticized. Ken Pollack, a friend of McMaster's who was on the staff of the National Security Council under Bill Clinton, told me, "He knew going into this that it was going to be a real challenge, and he wasn't sure how he was going to come out of it, personally." McMaster recognized that the job might be "disastrous for his reputation," Pollack said. "But he felt it was absolutely the right thing to do for the country." After McMaster accepted the position, one of his Army mentors, the retired general David Petraeus, invoked "Dereliction of Duty," asking McMaster, "What will be the title of the book they write about *you*?"

Trump first met McMaster, in February, 2017, at a hastily convened interview at Mar-a-Lago, after the ouster of Flynn. "He looks like a beer salesman!" Trump told aides in dismay. McMaster wore his dress uniform to the meeting. He has always looked more comfortable in desert camouflage than he does in a suit. He has the meaty physique of a longshoreman, with tiny blue eyes, a monumental shaved dome, and horizontal creases that line his forehead like a musical staff.

If Trump hadn't hired him, McMaster soon would have been out of a job. The Army is a hidebound organization that prizes conformity, and McMaster's lustrous public profile has not always translated into professional advancement. Janine Davidson, a former Pentagon official who is a friend of his, said, "H.R. shines really bright, and people notice that. He outshines his bosses." McMaster has tried to prevent his celebrity from scuppering his career. In 2014, after *Time* put him on its annual list of influential people, calling him the Army's "pre-eminent warrior-thinker," McMaster protested that, in the Army, "influence doesn't come from any individual," and suggested that the honor should be interpreted as a recognition of the Army "as a team." His strenuous expressions of humility can approach self-parody. "I don't think there's anything about my career or capabilities that warrants any kind of special recognition," he once said. (McMaster declined to be interviewed for this article,

but I was authorized to speak with ten of his aides on the N.S.C.)

McMaster's father, Herbert, served as an infantryman in the Korean War. His mother, Marie, was an elementary-school teacher. He has a sister, Letitia, to whom he is close. She told me that, when they were growing up, in Philadelphia, their mother instructed them to "use your patterns of logical thought." McMaster became a highly systematic thinker. "I always wanted to serve in the Army, from my earliest memory," he once remarked. Like Trump, he attended a military academy for high school, but, unlike Trump, he went on to West Point. Bill Rapp met him there in 1980, when they were both plebes. "He played rugby, and he's got this hard-nosed Philly edge," Rapp said. "Nobody can accuse him of being a wimp."

Through a rugby teammate, McMaster was introduced to a young woman named Katie Trotter, and they married in 1985. (He and Katie, an educator, have three adult daughters.) Upon graduating from West Point, McMaster joined the armored cavalry. But the Cold War was ending, and he feared that he might never see combat. He was stationed in West Germany when the Berlin Wall fell and people streamed across the border, carrying flowers. Katie noticed that he did not appear to share the general euphoria, and said, "You're just angry because you don't have an enemy anymore."

He needn't have worried. In 1991, during the first Gulf War, McMaster led a small troop of tanks through the Iraqi desert. They advanced through a sandstorm and took on a much larger Iraqi force that included some eighty tanks and other vehicles. McMaster had studied the cavalry tactics of Erwin Rommel. His own tank was nicknamed Mad Max.

The battle lasted twenty-three minutes. When the smoke cleared, dead Iraqis lay amid hunks of smoldering metal. "Everything around us had exploded or died, but we, like film characters, had miraculously survived," an officer who took part in the battle later wrote. It was one of the last major tank battles of the twentieth century. McMaster received a Silver Star for his valor.

In the years that followed, the nature of warfare changed, as urban insurgencies and terrorist cells became the dominant threats. McMaster, with his

nimble intellect, prodded the Army to absorb these changes. He grew concerned that, after the Gulf War, the military had been seduced by the promise of quick conflicts in which the U.S. could rely on its superior hardware and technology to rout any adversary. He was an outspoken critic of a phenomenon that he saw as a form of cognitive dissonance: military leaders' insisting on fighting the war they *wanted* to be fighting, rather than the war they actually were fighting. He called it the triumph of "theory over practice."

McMaster is "not apologetic about America's greatness," one of his N.S.C. colleagues told me. Several of them suggested that, to the degree that one can discern a foreign-policy world view in Trump's sloganeering, it is not very different from McMaster's. Unlike Trump, McMaster respects international alliances and sees value in protracted troop deployments, but both men regard the world as a dangerous arena in which the U.S. should not be afraid to exert its will. There is a practiced flair to McMaster's erudition, and in speeches and conversations he relies on a store of quotations from theorists and generals, from Clausewitz to Stonewall Jackson. Invoking Thucydides, he has suggested that peace is merely "an armistice in a war that is continuously going on."

At the University of North Carolina, where McMaster pursued his Ph.D., he distinguished himself for the thoroughness of his preparation. His adviser, Richard H. Kohn, once chided him for turning in a seminar paper that was two hundred pages long. According to Kohn, when McMaster began his dissertation, "what really intrigued him was the professionalism of the military—did these people do their job?"

In 2005, McMaster deployed again to Iraq, as the commander of the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment. He was one of the first Army officers to classify the simmering resistance among Iraqis as an insurgency. Paul Yingling, a retired lieutenant colonel who served as a staff officer to McMaster, told me, "H.R. was unusual in that he understood the non-kinetic aspects of operations." Yingling recalled accompanying McMaster to meetings with local tribal leaders. McMaster acknowledged their grievances

and conceded that the U.S. had made mistakes in the occupation of the country. "But the time for honorable resistance is over," he told them, adding, "Don't make me kill your young men in order to convince you that I'm serious."

To Yingling, McMaster had conjured "a pitch-perfect combination of diplomacy and violence." McMaster, he noted, was also unafraid to challenge pernicious behavior by his troops. After hearing them use the word "haji" as a slur for Iraqis, he banned the term. Some soldiers had taken to saying, "Better to be judged by twelve than carried by six"—that is, it was preferable to be tried for war crimes than killed in action. Yingling recalled that McMaster repudiated that kind of talk, too.

McMaster was careful to couch these admonitions in the realist idiom of narrow self-interest, telling his troops that such hostile sentiments did "the enemy's work for them," by radicalizing Iraqis. But his commitment to the Iraqi people seemed sincere. He arranged for a local mayor who had risked his life helping U.S. counter-insurgency efforts to be resettled in America; the two remain close.

Soldiers who served alongside McMaster tend to revere him, but he made some enemies in the Army. People joked that "H. R." stood for "HEAT round"—a kind of warhead—and McMaster became infamous for his temper. In 2010, the Army sent him to Afghanistan, to oversee a task force aimed at curbing corruption there. He approached the seemingly insurmountable problem with characteristic zeal, studying the local culture, establishing systematic "lines of effort," sleeping only four hours a night. But his exuberance turned into impatience when his civilian counterparts were slow to hold corrupt associates of President Hamid Karzai to account. At one meeting, McMaster got into an argument with Kirk Meyer, an official from the Drug Enforcement Administration, and the two men, in front of more than a dozen colleagues, entertained the notion of stepping outside to settle their differences. A witness to the exchange recalled, "It was the height of the surge. There were a hundred thousand troops in Afghanistan. The objective was civil-military integration. And in front of all these people McMaster is threatening to fight a dude!" When I asked Meyer

about the incident, he laughed it off, saying, “At the end of the meeting, I went up to him and he *hugged* me.”

Some military leaders are fundamentally contrarian, but McMaster, Ken Pollack said, “is not an iconoclast.” McMaster wasn’t shy about expressing his views—he once observed that, as an Army officer, you “can’t just be a yes-man and say, ‘Great idea, boss,’ if you don’t believe it, because *lives* are at stake”—but if his arguments were rejected he followed orders. In the Army, what duty most often necessitates is obedience.

Even so, on the first two occasions when he sought promotion to one-star general, he was passed over. It was only after an intervention by Petraeus, who left the war he was overseeing in Iraq to fly to Virginia and sit on McMaster’s promotion board, that he finally received his first star. Despite his deference to the chain of command, McMaster was not a company man in the narrow sense that the Army wanted. He was too brainy, too forthright, too intense. For years, superior officers schemed to end his career. “They didn’t want to give him his second star,” Pollack said. “They didn’t want to give him his *third* star.” In 2016, the Army informed McMaster that he would not receive a fourth star, and he decided to retire. “He was bitter,” Pollack said. “H.R. had the career that everyone told him he *should* have. Yet, in the end, it was exactly that which prevented him from grabbing the last brass ring.” McMaster was in talks with Harvard about a teaching job when the White House called.

It was Senator Tom Cotton, of Arkansas, an Iraq War Army veteran, who had pitched McMaster to the Trump Administration. Cotton had gone to Harvard, and when he was a teaching assistant in a government class, one of his students was Jared Kushner. After Flynn resigned, Cotton reached out to his former pupil, and to other officials, recommending McMaster for the national-security-adviser post.

Some associates of McMaster’s believe that his decision to take the position was not entirely selfless. The writer Thomas Ricks, who has known him since he was a major, told me, “McMas-

ter had unfulfilled ambition. The Army has not treated him well.”

Several months before McMaster accepted the N.S.C. job, his Ph.D. supervisor, Richard Kohn, had published an op-ed in the *Washington Post* arguing that even those Republican national-security experts who had opposed Trump as a candidate “must serve in a Trump administration if given the opportunity.”

Because Trump is “a master of chaos with no core belief,” Kohn said, it would be imperative for the safety of the nation that he be surrounded by levelheaded professionals. “You will have to be prepared to speak truth to power, and then to be ignored, overruled, dissed and otherwise em-

barrassed,” Kohn warned, adding, “The gig may test your capacity for abuse.”

The National Security Council was established by an act of Congress in 1947, “to advise the President with respect to the integration of domestic, foreign, and military policies relating to the national security.” Several years later, President Eisenhower created the position of national-security adviser. Strictly speaking, the N.S.C. consists of the President and several of his closest Cabinet secretaries and military and intelligence advisers. But over the decades, the N.S.C. staff has grown to include several hundred people. When McMaster assembled this cohort on his first day, in the auditorium of the Eisenhower Building, many professional staffers were feeling acutely demoralized. Michael Flynn’s tenure had been as tumultuous as it was short. One of the Trump Administration’s first acts was instituting a travel ban on individuals from seven predominantly Muslim countries. “We were horrified,” a former staffer recalled. Flynn’s deputy was K. T. McFarland, a veteran of several Republican Administrations who had become a Fox News personality. Career staffers had been offended when, at one all-hands meeting, McFarland proclaimed that everyone would work together to “make America great again.” At another meeting, McFarland brightly disclosed that the shoes she was wearing came from the fashion line of Ivanka Trump.



McMaster speaks in the rousing bark of a high-school football coach delivering a pregame pep talk. He told the N.S.C. staff that his commitment to the nonpolitical nature of the military was so pronounced that he had never voted in an election. Flynn, with his campaign chants of “Lock Her Up,” had not restrained himself in this way. But McMaster, ever upbeat, didn’t malign his predecessor. (Flynn had resigned amid questions about his relationship with Russian officials, and eventually pleaded guilty to charges of lying to F.B.I. agents.) Many in the room were reassured by McMaster’s performance. He signalled, discreetly, that he wanted to moderate the ideological tone of the Trump Administration. He announced that he disliked the term “radical Islamic terrorism,” and called Islam “a great religion.” He also expressed regret that the U.S. had not been tougher on Russia after Putin’s invasion of Crimea. Some people wondered how McMaster would reconcile such sentiments with the rather different impulses of his new boss. A person who attended the meeting told me, “We got back to the office and said, ‘Does he know where he’s working?’”

McMaster could not have been blind to the President’s moral shortcomings—his mendacity, his mean-spiritedness—but the military had taught him that you cannot pick your commanders. His friend David Kilcullen said, “H.R. was dealing with an incredibly painful dilemma—how do you keep your integrity while serving somebody who appears to have none of his own?”

During the Iraq War, McMaster sometimes had to negotiate between rival tribes. At the N.S.C., he encountered a different sort of tribal conflict. Flynn was gone, but many people he had brought into government remained. They were a motley assortment of former military and intelligence officials, craven agitators, and political operatives with no government experience. Privately, the career staff called them the Flynnstones. In a surprising move, Steve Bannon, the alt-right flamethrower who had been named Trump’s chief strategist, had been granted a seat on the N.S.C. McMaster also had to contend with Kushner, who had no formal national-security role and no experience in foreign affairs, but who oversaw an expansive, though nebulous,

portfolio, including China, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. McMaster initially balked at Kushner's role, saying, "You mean I've got somebody running a significant part of foreign policy who doesn't report into my structure?" According to a senior official, McMaster's colleagues told him, "This is the way the President wants it, and it's just going to happen." So McMaster let the matter go.

Any new Administration has inexperienced officials. Campaign staffers are rewarded for their loyalty with senior positions, and they learn on the job. Even so, Trump's appointees stood out for their sheer hackishness. The retired rear admiral Garry Hall was named special assistant to the President and senior director for international organizations and alliances. When Hall was flying helicopters in the Navy, his co-pilot was Steve Bannon's brother Chris. A former Administration official told me, "Garry lacks the intellectual depth to be a Bannomite ideologue. He's a very nice older gentleman. His world view is thoroughly shaped by all the Fox News he's watched." People who have dealt with Hall see his appointment as a reflection of the Trump Administration's dim regard for multilateralism. Hall is prone to off-color jokes, and in his spare time at the White House he produced a podcast that featured such episodes as "Leadership, Fitness, and Sex."

One virtue of having career employees is that political novices can draw on their experience. During the transition to the new Administration, N.S.C. staffers prepared briefing binders for Trump appointees. But the new officials showed little interest in the material. They weren't just dismissive of the professionals; they were suspicious of them.

"How long have you been here?" Kushner asked career staffers when he met them. The question became a litmus test: Trump appointees began describing career staffers whose loyalty to the new President was in doubt as "Obama hold-overs." It didn't matter that some of them had also served under George W. Bush. Suspicions intensified after embarrassing transcripts of telephone calls between Trump and two foreign leaders—Malcolm Turnbull, of Australia, and Enrique Peña Nieto, of Mexico—leaked to the press. Trump loyalists were certain that the President was being sabotaged. The

staffers found the insinuation outrageous. "The bureaucrats were all willing to do what they were told," one former staffer said to me. "You want to go to war with North Korea? O.K.! We just want there to be a *process*."

There was also confusion about the lines of authority within the new Administration. Bannon seemed to hover over Trump's foreign-policy calculations. Kushner attended high-level meetings but said little. At an early meeting on North Korea, in the White House Situation Room, General Joseph Dunford, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, arrived to discover that he had no seat at the table—but Kushner did. After Dunford took a chair against the wall, Kushner offered to switch places. "Dunford took him up on it, immediately," a witness recalled. Kushner was silent throughout the meeting, and took no notes.

The White House official Sebastian Gorka, a bloviating Islamophobe, also generated tension. He often appeared on Fox News, which treated him as an authority on the President's counterterrorism policy. But, according to multiple Administration officials, he was never granted a high-level security clearance. In 2016, he had been arrested for attempting to board a plane with a concealed handgun. Gorka had access to the Eisenhower Building, however, and he prowled its halls. A former employee told me that, whenever Gorka entered their offices, staffers subtly averted their computer screens, so that he could not glimpse

classified material. Gorka was fired by the White House in August, soon after John Kelly became chief of staff. Two days later, Gorka told the *Jerusalem Post* that McMaster viewed "the threat of Islam through an Obama Administration lens." (In an e-mail, Gorka insisted that he had a security clearance, and that anyone who said otherwise was "a liar.")

McMaster sought to cultivate Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, proposing that they meet for weekly breakfasts. Tillerson, who showed little regard for McMaster, demurred. McMaster then suggested weekly phone calls. Tillerson had an aide take his place, or skipped the calls altogether. (Tillerson was fired, by tweet, in March.) Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis was no more supportive. Last April, when he learned that McMaster planned to visit Afghanistan, Mattis told him not to go. According to an official familiar with the exchange, Mattis may have been "miffed" because, at that point, he had not yet been to Afghanistan as Defense Secretary. McMaster went anyway, an act of defiance from which the relationship never recovered.

McMaster faced the pervasive dysfunction at the N.S.C. with his usual blinkered optimism. He worked long hours, and his staff scheduled in "gym time" to help him cope with stress. (A portrait of vigor, McMaster took work calls while huffing on the treadmill, with sensitive papers fanned out on the console.) He had some natural allies on the staff, because Flynn had installed many



"Hey, hey! There's a line here!"

current and former military professionals. One Flynn appointee was a close friend of McMaster's: Derek Harvey, a retired Army colonel who was also a Petraeus protégé.

"There are some people who like to sit back and *admire* a problem," Bill Rapp said. "H.R. is going to do something about it." Several people who have worked with McMaster perceive, in his tireless gumption, a form of naïveté. When he arrived in Afghanistan in 2010 to tackle corruption, he irked some of his colleagues. "It was as though you could take a problem that had existed in Afghanistan for the better part of a millennium and solve it by rigorously studying it for a month," someone who worked with him there recalled. "It sounded a lot like hubris." McMaster's efforts did little to curb the endemic graft. (Another former official who was associated with the project told me, acridly, "In Afghanistan, H.R. used to talk about 'criminal corruption networks.' Now he works for one.")

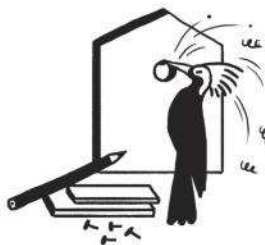
Before joining the Trump Administration, McMaster had never worked in Washington. Yet he pledged to clean up the N.S.C. with the same cock-eyed resolve that he had brought to Afghanistan. He read histories of the organization and met with his living predecessors. He selected as his model Brent Scowcroft—the diminutive, unassuming, supremely capable national-security adviser to both Gerald Ford and George H. W. Bush. Just as McMaster had forbidden soldiers to say "haji" in Iraq, he now told his staff that he did not want to hear the words "Obama holdover" in the Eisenhower Building. "We are all one team," he said.

In a BBC interview in December, McMaster declared, "What we owe the President is options." He might highlight "advantages and disadvantages," but "the President makes the decision." McMaster announced that he was determined to be, like Scowcroft, an honest broker who would coordinate policy deliberations among government agencies and then present potential courses of action to the President. He had rejected the model typified by Henry Kissinger, a policy auteur who relentlessly advanced his own views. But there was one immediate respect in which

McMaster was unlike Scowcroft. Before accepting the position, Scowcroft, who had been a lieutenant general in the Air Force, retired from the service, because he did not believe that an active-duty officer should hold the job. Several people close to McMaster recommended that he do the same. As a civilian, he might feel more license to resist an unsound order from the President—or, if it came to that, to quit.

McMaster chose not to retire. One of his closest advisers suggested to me that McMaster believed remaining a general would insulate him from political pressure, by underscoring his separateness. Others who know him suspected that he couldn't give up hope of further advancement in the Army. Another national-security adviser who had chosen to serve in uniform was Colin Powell, who, upon leaving the White House, returned to the Army—and got his fourth star.

Powell had famously instituted discipline on the Reagan Administration's N.S.C. after the scandals of the Iran-Contra affair. McMaster hoped to play a similar role. One critique of the Obama Administration was that foreign policy had been too centralized at the White House, with N.S.C. staffers doing the kind of operational decision-making that is better left to departments and agencies. Military commanders in Iraq and Afghanistan have told horror stories about receiving micromanaging phone calls



from N.S.C. officials in Washington. McMaster aimed to revert to tradition. In October, at a panel at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, McMaster remarked that in recent years the N.S.C. "did cross a line." He continued, "Consistent with President Trump's guidance, we have devolved responsibility and authorities back to the departments." Several of McMaster's predecessors joined him on the panel, among them Kissinger, who had simultaneously

served as both national-security adviser and Secretary of State in the Nixon Administration. In his bronchial croak, Kissinger quipped, "Relations between the operators and conceivers were never better than when I held both jobs."

The panel discussion was held to celebrate the N.S.C.'s seventieth anniversary, but the subtext of the evening, which the panelists were too scrupulously diplomatic to acknowledge, was the profound upheaval of the present moment. None of McMaster's predecessors had served a President who derided a nuclear rival as "Little Rocket Man." None had contended with a Commander-in-Chief who spoke approvingly about autocrats. It might make sense, in the abstract, for McMaster to talk about "devolving" authority to the State Department, but there essentially *was* no State Department anymore: under the absentee leadership of Tillerson, six of the top nine positions at the department were empty, and numerous critical ambassadorial posts remained unfilled. There was no U.S. envoy to Saudi Arabia, or to Germany, Egypt, or the European Union.

In interviews with senior officials who worked closely with McMaster at the N.S.C., I was struck by a sense of willful disconnection. They tended to talk, even on background, as if they were working in the mainstream tradition of U.S. foreign policy, and they behaved, at least outwardly, as though they were not grappling every day with an Administration that was radically unstable. According to a former official, at another meeting on North Korea in the White House Situation Room, K. T. McFarland joked, "You know, the President could send one tweet and all of this will be overturned!"

"We all laughed," the former official told me. "But this was the *deputy national-security adviser*. I mean, it's scary." When I asked people who worked for McMaster if it was difficult to engage in a deliberative policy process when Trump might embrace a radically different course in one of his predawn tantrums, they reminded me, with the frozen smile of a Stepford wife, that "different Presidents communicate in different ways." When the BBC reporter asked McMaster, in December, if he wished the President didn't tweet, he replied, "Aristotle said, 'Focus on what you can control and you can make a

difference.' The President will do what the President wants to do. It's his way of reaching the American people.' He continued, in a tone reminiscent of a hostage video, "My job is not to worry about Twitter."

This refusal by McMaster and his staff to acknowledge obvious anomalies may simply have reflected a fear of the wrath that the President might visit upon candid subordinates. But I also sensed, in the robotically sanguine accounts of McMaster's team, a collective delusion. One of his aides told me that Administration staffers felt isolated, because old friends and colleagues "fell away." The "Never Trump" center-right disowned them for coddling a tyrant; people on the left were repulsed by Trump's "America-first" agenda; even the Bannonite far right disdained them, for being insufficiently extreme. So McMaster and his colleagues may have adopted a bunker mentality, and focussed on one thing that they could control: process. At times, they seemed to be living out the twelve-step adage about faking it until you make it. If they instituted a policy architecture resembling what had come before, maybe they could contain the chaos emanating from the Oval Office. One of McMaster's senior aides said of him, "He would constantly pull people back into process." Another said, "We built this process that was incredibly effective." Multiple people who worked closely with McMaster suggested to me, without irony, that this was one of the most effective National Security Councils in history. (One of them added, "If you grade on a curve.")

But rational protocols at the N.S.C. matter little if the President doesn't respect them. McMaster's process "had the veneer of something that Stephen Hadley or Condi Rice or Susan Rice would recognize," a former staffer told me. "But it's not getting the work done." Another former N.S.C. official said, "There are two parallel tracks—there's the inter-agency process, and then Trump makes a decision. But there's often no suggestion that he's making decisions with *reference* to that process. It's two ships in the night." The President, speaking to Fox News in November, put it more succinctly. When asked about his failure to fill key State Department posts, Trump responded that, when it comes to foreign policy, "I'm the only one that matters."



"Thank you so much! I'll keep this in my special box of things I can't throw away for fear of hurting someone's feelings."

In December, the White House unveiled its "National Security Strategy," a sixty-eight-page document in which the N.S.C. staff laid out Trump's official view of the world. McMaster's aides proudly claimed that this was the first time a national-security-strategy document had been published within the first year of a Presidential Administration. The document had conspicuously Trumpian lacunae; there were no references to climate change as a national-security threat, for example. But it seemed to be an effort to domesticate some of Trump's bellicose rhetoric, emphasizing the importance of competition among the great powers but also of American leadership. Trump had mocked NATO as "obsolete"; the document described the alliance as "one of our greatest advantages." It explicitly named Russia and China as malign influences, and declared that the Russians had used technology "to undermine the legitimacy of democracies." Such language was in sharp contrast with Trump's strenuous avoidance of blaming the Kremlin for election interference. An N.S.C. official told me, "The fundamental question is, can you divorce Presidential rhetoric from American foreign policy?"

Composing the document was a challenge, because Trump did not *have*

many concrete views on foreign policy beyond bumper-sticker sentiments like "America first." When McMaster requested Trump's input, the President grew frustrated and defensive, as if he'd been ambushed with a pop quiz. So staffers adopted Trump's broad ideal of American competitiveness and tried to extrapolate which policies he might favor in specific instances. McMaster touted the resulting document as "highly readable," and as a text it seems reassuringly plausible. But nobody on McMaster's staff could confirm for me with any conviction that the President himself had read it.

One reason that Brent Scowcroft was a successful national-security adviser was that he had a pattern of relationships already established," Eliot Cohen pointed out. McMaster himself once observed that, in seeking to understand historical events, "you cannot neglect the personalities." Jimmy Carter trusted Zbigniew Brzezinski implicitly. Barack Obama talked basketball with Susan Rice. But McMaster couldn't establish a rapport with Trump.

The mismatch was surprising. The President gravitates toward people who are brash and informal, and McMaster is a jocular, witty guy. He was forever

joking with his staff, and sometimes gathered them around a screen to watch YouTube clips. (He is partial to “Best in Show,” a comedy about dog pageants.) Once, at a morning meeting at the White House, John Kelly asked McMaster if he’d read a certain memo. McMaster replied that he hadn’t yet—because he’d been at the gym. After a moment of disapproving silence, McMaster added, in a gruff deadpan, “A body like this doesn’t just *happen*.”

McMaster has a “frat-guy appeal,” a senior Administration official told me. “But when he’s with the President he only has one mode—he is a general briefing the Commander-in-Chief.” On the rare occasions when McMaster cracked a joke—parrying some slight by Trump with a mildly sarcastic “You hurt my feelings, Mr. President”—his staff would nudge him afterward and say, “Do that more! You’re funny!” But McMaster’s sense of propriety made it hard for him to engage in the kind of banter that Trump favors. More than one McMaster ally told me it was a shame that the President and his national-security adviser had never had a beer together. Trump doesn’t drink.

Ken Pollack said that McMaster thought a lot about how to improve his relationship with Trump, to no avail. “This President never likes the smartest guy in the room,” John Nagl, a former Army officer who has known McMaster for years, said. “And it’s the *job* of the national-security adviser to be the smartest guy in the room.” Steve Bannon would complain that McMaster lectured the President even though Trump hated being lectured. There is an inescapable complexity to matters of national security and foreign affairs, and McMaster seemed unable to abbreviate his briefings. In the Army, he had banned PowerPoint, remarking, “Some problems in the world are not bullet-izable.” Now he had to tell a President who wanted everything reduced to bullet points that the world was not as simple as he thought.

Initially, Pollack said, McMaster gave Trump “the benefit of the doubt,” assuming that he could understand complicated issues. Every day, McMaster subjected Trump to detailed briefings. According to Pollack, the President just sat there. “He would *look* like he was interested,” Pollack said. “He was prob-

GIRLHOOD

was when I slept in the woods
bareheaded beneath jagged
stars and the membranous
near-misses of bats, when
I tasted watercress,
wild carrot, and sorrel,
when I was known
by the lilac I hid beside,
and when that lilac, burdened
by my expectations of lilacs,
began a journey
without me, as when
the dirt road sang, O,
rugosa rose, farewell,
and ran behind the clipped
white pine hedge into
the immeasurable
heartbreaks of the field.

—Cecily Parks

ably trying to imagine how many times H.R. has to shave his head every day, while H.R. is going on and on about the complexities of Russia policy.” Only later, Pollack said, did McMaster realize that “the guy wasn’t absorbing a fucking thing he said!”

McMaster’s staff urged him to condense his briefings and make them more conversational. (In an interview with a senior official, I described this process as “dumbing down,” and the official corrected me—“Let’s say ‘*simplified*’”—with a speed that suggested McMaster may also have banned the phrase “dumbing down.”) McMaster felt that oversimplifying national-security matters “was dangerous,” Pollack told me. He tried to turn his wonkishness into a joke: “Mr. President, just seventeen quick points on that!” But Trump responded with open disdain. According to “Fire and Fury,” the book by Michael Wolff, Trump complained that his national-security adviser was “boring.”

Trump wasn’t entirely incurious about other nations, but he tended to focus on transactional matters. During foreign-affairs briefings, he often interrupted to inquire about a nation’s gross domestic product. “It became a fixation,” a former staffer told me. “Our memos

all had to include this kind of basic ‘World Factbook’ data.” Trump was obsessed with trade, to a degree that risked undermining other strategic priorities. He was frustrated that the U.S. had a trade deficit with its longtime ally South Korea, and, in a gambit that had the whiff of extortion, he occasionally threatened to withdraw U.S. troops and military aid from the country if the imbalance was not addressed. In an exchange with Angela Merkel, of Germany, Trump returned eleven times to the prospect of a bilateral trade agreement, even though Germany, as a member of the European Union, could not legally negotiate any such deal.

“The power of the national-security adviser is that the President wants to hear what you have to say,” Michèle Flournoy, an under-secretary of defense during the Obama Administration, told me. An initial test of McMaster’s clout came in February, 2017, when he urged Trump not to use the phrase “radical Islamic terrorism” in a joint address to Congress. The President did anyway. McMaster was more successful in a fight over Afghanistan policy. Before becoming President, Trump had critiqued the war in Afghanistan, and once he assumed office he expressed frustration that the U.S. was still involved in

the conflict. Bannon and McMaster openly clashed over Afghanistan, and in at least one instance McMaster lost his temper, reportedly shouting, “You’re a liar!” (One assumes that Bannon knew better than to ask him to step outside.) Bannon loathed McMaster, deriding him as a “globalist” who was all too eager to commit troops to foreign conflicts in which America had little strategic interest. He pushed for a withdrawal of troops. McMaster told his staff that anyone who briefed Trump about Afghanistan should be prepared for his first question: “What are we still doing there?” He presented Trump with photographs of Kabul from the nineteen-seventies, when it was a more peaceful, stable city. The message, tailored to Trump’s preference for images, was implicit: Afghanistan is not hopeless. Things can change. Trump ultimately sided with McMaster, committing several thousand additional troops.

But McMaster’s battle with Bannon was just beginning. When McMaster took the job, he did so with the understanding that he could hire his own staff. He replaced K. T. McFarland and, with Trump’s blessing, removed Bannon from the National Security Council. A former Administration official told me, “The whole reason Bannon went after H.R. wasn’t that he was a globalist—it was that he pushed Bannon off the N.S.C.” Breitbart News and other alt-right outlets demonized McMaster, suggesting that he was in league with “Obama holdovers” to undermine the President. Rumors spread that Administration officials had established an “insider threat” program at the N.S.C., and were trying to root out disloyal staffers.

Most N.S.C. employees spend their careers out of the public eye. But a series of online posts by Bannon allies targeted staff members who were perceived as traitorous, exposing personal details about them. A woman named Megan Badasch, who had worked for Trump during the transition and had become the N.S.C.’s deputy executive secretary, was subjected to so much online abuse that she became fearful for her own safety and moved out of her apartment. Badasch regarded herself as a Trump loyalist, and felt that she had been slandered. One of McMaster’s daughters

tried to reassure her, saying, “If you’re being attacked because you’re on Dad’s side, you’re on the right side of history.” (She stayed in her post.) Another N.S.C. staffer, Eric Ciaramella, was described on right-wing blogs as a leaker out to “sabotage Trump.” After receiving death threats, he quit the N.S.C. and returned to his home agency.

According to numerous Administration officials, at least some of the leaks about the N.S.C. were coming from the Flynnstones: they were passing information about colleagues to Bannonite allies on the outside. “It’s like cyberbullying at the highest level,” a senior official told me. “You’re scared. Because these are bad people.” As the atmosphere grew increasingly poisonous, McMaster began to fire the Flynnstones, including his old friend Derek Harvey. Harvey was rumored to have aligned himself with Bannon, though he insisted to friends that this wasn’t the case. He had become consumed with questioning the loyalty of the career staff of the N.S.C.’s Middle East directorate. One day, a member of the directorate approached McMaster after a meeting. “I don’t know if you’re aware of this, but Derek is trying to fire practically the entire staff,” he said.

“Shouldn’t I have a say?” McMaster asked, before putting a stop to the mass termination.

McMaster tried to reassure the political appointees that the professional staffers weren’t spies but, rather, a valuable source of institutional knowledge. Nevertheless, the hostility persisted. At one point, McMaster asked each N.S.C. directorate to generate a memo outlining the most severe threats that it faced. Harvey was responsible for producing the Middle East directorate’s list. According to someone who saw it, the No. 1 threat was not ISIS, or the war in Syria, but “problematic holdovers.” “It was so unhinged,” the person said.

When McMaster dismissed his old friend, he said, “Derek, it’s just not working out.” An associate of McMaster’s told me that firing Harvey was “a hard call for H.R.,” adding, “He loves Derek.” (Harvey, who declined to comment for this article, joined the staff of Representative Devin Nunes.)

Reporters asked McMaster about the abuse he was receiving. He shrugged it off, saying, “It doesn’t hurt my feel-

ings.” But, in truth, it was making him a bit paranoid. He asked the office of the White House counsel to initiate an investigation of leaks at the N.S.C., and in September he mandated that every federal department and agency hold an hour-long training session on “unauthorized disclosures.”

By the end of the summer, McMaster had weeded out some of his most toxic subordinates. But his working relationship with Trump remained awkward, and Mattis and Tillerson—whom McMaster referred to as the Team of Two—accorded him little respect. “Both Mattis and Tillerson realized that this is not someone who is going to have the President’s ear,” a former senior Administration official told me. Traditionally, the national-security adviser’s physical proximity to the President confers a special power that the Cabinet secretaries do not enjoy. Yet McMaster’s daily exposure to Trump seemed not to strengthen his authority but to weaken it. McMaster, feeling that Mattis, a former four-star general, condescended to him, would grumble aloud to his staff, “I’m being treated like a three-star!”

Of course, McMaster *was* a three-star. Military codes of hierarchy may be so enduring that it didn’t matter that Mattis was retired, and that McMaster, as Trump’s representative, technically had authority over him. Moreover, in another sense, McMaster, as an active-duty military officer, was Mattis’s subordinate. “Remember, Mattis, as the Secretary of Defense, is his other boss,” a McMaster aide told me. At meetings, McMaster referred to Nikki Haley, the Ambassador to the U.N., as “Nikki,” and Tillerson as “Rex.” He addressed Mattis as “sir.”

On May 10, 2017, the day after Trump dismissed the F.B.I. director, James Comey, he welcomed the Russian foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, and the Russian Ambassador, Sergey Kislyak, to the Oval Office. McMaster attended the meeting. The American press corps was barred, though a photographer from the Russian state news agency was permitted to take pictures. Several days later, the *Washington Post* revealed that Trump had casually disclosed to the Russian officials top-secret intelligence from a U.S. ally about an ISIS terrorist

threat—a plot to blow up airplanes by sneaking onboard laptop computers embedded with explosives. Although Trump did not reveal the source of his information, he did mention where the ally had learned of the threat: a Syrian city within the territory held by ISIS. This clue likely allowed the Russians to determine that the intelligence had come from Israel. America's closest intelligence relationships are predicated on the understanding that shared information will be carefully handled. Kislyak was widely assumed to be a Russian spymaster, and though Russia and the U.S. ostensibly share a commitment to combatting ISIS, they have starkly different interests in Syria, where Russia supports the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. In the context of the Comey firing and the simmering suspicions about Russian collusion, Trump's blithe disclosure was a grave blunder.

After the *Washington Post* reported on the gaffe, creating a furor, the White House denied that Trump had divulged such information. But the President undercut this story line when he acknowledged, on Twitter, that he had indeed done so. Then McMaster held a press conference to address the controversy. He labelled the *Post* story false, although he did not explain what was inaccurate about it, and he glossed over Trump's disclosure of classified information to a hostile adversary, focussing instead on the fact that the President did not appear to have jeopardized "sources and methods." McMaster seemed sincerely exasperated with the press. "It is wholly appropriate for the President to share whatever information he thinks is necessary to advance the security of the American people," he said. His remarks were brief but aggressive; he managed to use the phrase "wholly appropriate" nine times.

Many of McMaster's friends found the press conference hard to watch. "We all looked at that and said, 'O.K., man, you're trying *real* hard,'" Janine Davidson, the former Pentagon official, recalled. In light of McMaster's book, and his unrestrained temperament, some observers had hoped that he might be effective as Trump's foil, curbing the President's most virulent instincts. Perhaps the press conference simply illustrated how far McMaster was willing

to go to preserve his relationship with Trump, in order to protect the nation. As Davidson put it to me, "How many times a week, or a month, does he manage to talk the President out of something? Probably a lot."

John Nagl sounded a similar note: "On H.R.'s shoulders may be decisions that preserve the world from the threat of thermonuclear war, and there's literally nobody else who I would rather have in that position," he told me. "If that means he has to say some things that are not completely true, I'm O.K. with that." In this telling, McMaster was a martyr—a man who loved America so much that he was prepared to sacrifice his own reputation in order to save it.

But others wondered if McMaster had transgressed a moral boundary. In "Dereliction of Duty," he had described a dangerous phenomenon in which military men became "shields," insulating political leaders from criticism by lending an aura of unimpeachability to their decisions—even reckless ones. Paul Yingling, who had served alongside McMaster in Iraq, was sickened by his White House appearance. "It is never O.K. for an officer to lie, period," he said. "If you want to get into politics and shade the truth, great. But take off the uniform. The problem is when you mix categories: when you ask for the presumption of honor that goes with being an officer and then you mislead the public." In Yingling's view, it was grotesque to exploit that honor "as a political asset."

Yingling believes that the officer's code left McMaster no choice but to quit. "You don't make instrumental calculations about questions of honor," he said. "Some of these senior military officers in the Trump Administration forget that the Constitution they swore to defend includes the Twenty-fifth Amendment. If they believe that the President is unfit, then their job is not to work behind the scenes to mitigate, or paper over, his infirmities. It's their duty to resign—and go public about why they're doing it."

Erin Simpson, a defense analyst who worked with McMaster in Afghanistan, has suggested that when honorable people take senior positions in this Administration they become "part of the

solution *and* part of the problem." Thomas Ricks told me that McMaster surely approached his job in good faith, but added, "Watching him, I came to believe that, at a certain point, he was just putting lipstick on a pig."

Several of McMaster's close associates on the N.S.C. strenuously objected to such characterizations. Numerous people told me they were sure that McMaster had established "red lines"—things that he would have refused to do for Trump. But nobody could tell me what those things were. And it is tempting to wonder whether, in this moment of bread and circuses, with fresh scandals erupting every day, the gesture of resigning in protest would have had any effect. Trump's Secretary of Veterans Affairs, David Shulkin, wrote an indignant Op-Ed in the *Times* after he was fired, late this past March, and it registered for barely a news cycle. In "Dereliction of Duty," McMaster recounts the story of Harold Johnson, an Army chief of staff who considered resigning during the Vietnam War. "I could resign, and what am I?" Johnson says. "I'm a disgruntled general for forty-eight hours, and then I'm out of sight." McMaster notes, however, that this failure to act on principle haunted Johnson for the rest of his life.

Whatever McMaster's personal calculus, the people around him insist that he has no regrets about his tenure. "I really take issue with the notion that he opportunistically set his principles aside," an official who worked closely with him said, adding, "I think where some people have a hard time is that, ideologically, General McMaster may find himself aligned with the main thrust of Trump's foreign policy." Both Trump and McMaster disdained the Obama Administration's lofty rhetoric about arcs of history bending toward justice, and saw the world as an arena for brute competition.

Nowhere was this apparent affinity more pronounced than on North Korea policy. McMaster has always had a hawkish temperament. "Dereliction of Duty" is not critical of U.S. engagement in Vietnam *per se*—but of *incremental* U.S. engagement. McMaster retains a deep faith in conventional American military power. Efforts by previous Administrations to halt North Korea's

development of nuclear weapons had proved fruitless. As national-security adviser, McMaster became associated in the press with the so-called bloody-nose strategy, in which the U.S. might launch a “preventive” conventional attack on North Korea, stunning the regime of Kim Jong Un into cowed recognition of America’s power. McMaster has suggested that traditional deterrence may not work with Kim, and that if North Korea develops a long-range nuclear capability it would represent “the most destabilizing development” in the international order since the Second World War. In an interview with George Stephanopoulos in August, McMaster displayed few reservations about deploying military options. “The United States military is locked and loaded,” he said.

Some of McMaster’s friends were shocked that he might advocate such a strategy. The human toll would likely be catastrophic, because Kim would almost certainly retaliate by launching an attack on Seoul. Secretary Mattis has suggested that the scenario could result in “probably the worst kind of fighting in most people’s lifetime.” The strategy also had a glaring logical flaw: if the basis for a preventative strike were the assumption that Kim cannot otherwise be deterred, what grounds would there be to think that a “bloody nose” might deter him? Some admirers of McMaster’s told me that if he had appeared to endorse a conventional-weapons attack, it must have been a bluff—an effort to constrain Kim through rhetoric. But, when I floated this theory to several people who have worked on the Trump N.S.C., they scoffed. “Bullshit,” one said. “There’s no way this team could ever pull off anything approaching that level of sophistication.”

McMaster’s staff insisted to me that, contrary to widespread reports, he never adopted the bloody-nose position. “He never said ‘bloody nose,’” a close aide told me. Instead, staffers suggested, McMaster simply provided a comprehensive list of military options to the President. They contrasted this approach with that of Jim Mattis. There had been instances, with regard to North Korea and also Iran, in which McMaster requested war plans from Mattis, only to have Mattis refuse to supply them. To McMaster and his colleagues, Mattis’s



apparent attempts to limit Trump’s options verged on insubordination. One senior N.S.C. official told me that Mattis perceives his role as playing “baby-sitter” to the President.

“Part of the friction in H.R.’s relationship with Trump was that the guy didn’t like the fact that his foreign-policy team was just stonewalling him,” Ken Pollack said. And Trump didn’t seem to perceive that Mattis was doing the stonewalling. Two senior officials at the White House told me that when Trump demanded to know what had become of options he requested, McMaster, always the Boy Scout, refused to point the finger at Mattis. He just said, “We’re working on it, sir.” According to Pollack, McMaster believed that part of the tension he experienced with Mattis and Tillerson sprang from their perception that he was “too responsive” to the President.

Erin Simpson said that there is a “Goldilocks problem” when it comes to advising Trump. In most Administrations, a policy adviser might present three choices: one that’s too cold, one that’s too hot, and a third that’s just right. But what do you do when you are serving a President who nearly always

picks the hot option? The delicate game theory of nuclear brinkmanship is predicated, in no small part, on the idea that the two sides are engaging in rational calculation. Yet both Trump and Kim are prone to intemperate rhetoric, peacocking, and impulsive decisions. According to multiple senior officials, in early January the President asked his staff to present him with a range of evacuation plans for the approximately two hundred thousand American civilians who live in South Korea. (On TV, Senator Lindsey Graham was calling for dependents of U.S. soldiers there to be brought home.) Any evacuation would send a profoundly alarming signal to South Korea, and inevitably put the U.S. and North Korea on a war footing. McMaster and his staff dutifully began gathering options for the President. The deliberations were scuttled only after Mattis and Kelly intervened.

Adam Smith, the top Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee, once told Mattis, “Your job is to make sure these morons don’t get up in the morning and advance some lame-brained idea.” Mattis’s interactions with McMaster indicate that he perceives Trump as a radically mercurial figure who must

be managed with a degree of manipulation and care that exceeds the usual parameters of his job. McMaster, in his insistence on a doctrinaire approach to his position, could seem, at times, like the Army leaders he once criticized—fighting the war he wanted to fight, rather than the one he was fighting.

“The job is the job,” one of McMaster’s close aides told me, arguing that there was nothing about Trump that necessitated a bespoke approach to the presentation of military options. If Mattis was a babysitter, then McMaster was a waiter, presenting the Commander-in-Chief with a menu, and letting him order. This is the irony of Trump’s ambivalence about McMaster: there should have been no question about his loyalty. At a White House press briefing in January, a journalist asked McMaster if Trump’s incendiary rhetoric—and his refusal to speak out about human rights and freedom of expression—might be “creating a climate where authoritarian leaders feel they have free reign.”

“It’s just not true,” McMaster said, insisting that Trump had “spoken loudly” about human rights. McMaster cited language from a few teleprompter speeches that Trump had delivered, and refused to otherwise address the question. The exchange was striking not so much for McMaster’s disingenuousness, as for the fact that he actually appeared to believe his own spin. In October, Lindsey Graham joined Trump at an event in South Carolina, and afterward Trump invited Graham to fly back to

Washington with him. On the flight, Trump asked him, “What do you think of McMaster?”

Graham replied, “The man is always on message for you.”

Trump demands loyalty, but he seldom rewards it. One day in early March, I had just entered the White House grounds when MSNBC, citing five sources, reported that McMaster was about to be fired. When I alerted one of his aides to the story, she seemed bewildered, saying, “He’s been in meetings with the President all day!” Later that afternoon, Trump denied the story, calling it “fake news,” and saying that McMaster was doing “a great job.”

McMaster’s staff told me that he had dealt with the months-long uncertainty about his employment with “dignity and honor,” but also with gallows humor. After the MSNBC story, McMaster attended a meeting of his senior staff and announced, “I will be leaving the White House.” He waited just long enough for alarm to register on people’s faces before adding, “We will *all* be leaving the White House, eventually.” He adopted the same tone of cavalier existentialism in meetings with some of his foreign counterparts, occasionally punctuating discussions of future plans with “I might not be here next week!” This may have endeared McMaster to foreign ministers, but it could not help the standing or stability of the United States to have a national-security adviser who was so obviously operating on borrowed time.

McMaster surely hastened his own demise when he acknowledged, at the Munich Security Conference, in February, that Robert Mueller had amassed “incontrovertible” evidence of a Russian effort to interfere in the 2016 election. When a Russian official at the event proposed a joint initiative between Russia and the United States on cybersecurity, McMaster replied, “I’m surprised there are any Russian cyber experts available, based on how active they have been in undermining our democracies across the West.” Within hours, Trump publicly rebuked him with a tweet: “General McMaster forgot to say that the results of the 2016 election were not impacted or changed by the Russians and that the only Collusion was between Russia and Crooked H, the DNC and the Dems.” McMaster’s staff was caught off guard. They had not found his comments in Munich particularly controversial. As if to underline how superfluous his national-security adviser had become, Trump announced three weeks later that, rather than give Kim Jong Un a bloody nose, he would break with decades of American precedent and hold direct talks with the North Korean leader. Trump, in an apparent acknowledgment that he prefers to conduct foreign policy by instinct, said that when it came to war and peace he could “go hard in either direction.”

Trump’s announcement was welcomed in the mainstream press, insofar as it represented an alternative to a military strike. But the plan had its own risks. Trump is not, in fact, a great negotiator. A one-on-one meeting was already a victory for Kim: whatever the outcome of the talks, he would bolster his legitimacy by sitting down with a U.S. President. And how would such a meeting unfold? As the “DO NOT CONGRATULATE” episode made clear, Trump has a compulsion to blurt out precisely the thing that he has been instructed not to say. And who would prepare him for the talks? Joseph Yun, the U.S. Special Representative for North Korea Policy, quit at the end of February and was not replaced. Trump had still not appointed an Ambassador to South Korea. (The Administration’s candidate for the job, the widely respected scholar Victor Cha, had suddenly been withdrawn, reportedly because the White House



“That table is yours once that party decides to move to the suburbs.”

deemed him insufficiently hawkish.) And in mid-March Trump fired Tillerson. When South Korea's foreign minister, Kang Kyung-wha, visited Washington several days later, Tillerson's replacement, Mike Pompeo, had not yet been confirmed as Secretary of State. Kang met with Ivanka Trump instead.

The delay in firing McMaster could be attributed, in part, to an effort to find him another position in the Army. This would have been a fitting reward for McMaster's service: he could return to the institution where he had spent his whole career, and perhaps earn a fourth star. But several people close to McMaster told me that he regarded his tenure on the N.S.C. as his "terminal" position in government. The Army did float a number of possible assignments, including the command of U.S. Army forces in the Pacific. But an aide told me that McMaster may have found these offers "demeaning"; the Pacific job is a four-star position, but, because the region is dominated by the Navy, it is not considered a plum assignment. Moreover, a senior White House official told me, "I don't think Mattis wanted him back." McMaster, who had written a book about the importance of military advisers remaining untainted by politics, was now tainted himself. "It's harder for H.R. to be legitimized as a four-star after serving in a political position—especially in this Administration," Bill Rapp said.

One uncanny feature of the Trump Presidency is the degree to which the former star of "The Apprentice" has reenacted, in the White House, a serialized reality show built around dramatic firings. The Washington establishment and the press have been co-opted all too easily by this spectacle, wallowing in the palace intrigue and speculating about who might be ousted next. As rumors of McMaster's departure swirled, he approached Trump. "Do you want me to go?" he asked. "I'll go as hard as I can for as long as I can. But if you want me to go now, I'll go."

"I'll get back to you," Trump replied.

McMaster hoped to stay in the job through the summer. But on March 22nd Trump telephoned him and said that it was time. The President had shouted at McMaster about the "DO NOT CONGRATULATE" leak, but never actually

suggested that he was responsible for it. McMaster's staff pointed out that it would have been self-defeating for him to have engineered such a leak; in fact, more than one senior official suggested to me that the leak may have emanated from someone in the White House who was trying to frame McMaster.

The morning after he was fired, McMaster called an all-hands meeting in the same auditorium where he had first greeted his staff. He received a three-minute standing ovation. True to form, McMaster exuded optimism, not bitterness, praising his colleagues and exhorting them to do everything they could to empower his successor, John Bolton—an unrepentant hawk who is expected to adopt a more Kissingerian approach to the position.

Over the several months that I reported this story, I asked friends and colleagues of McMaster's why he put up with the indignities of the job, instead of resigning. Many offered the same explanation: he knew that if he left because he had grave qualms about Trump, he would be replaced by someone else who didn't have those qualms. As Nagl told me, "For John Bolton, there *is* no moral dilemma."

In describing McMaster's accomplishments, numerous officials pointed to the relatively moderate language of the "National Security Strategy," and to his success in persuading Trump not to completely jettison the Iran agreement. But McMaster had been replaced by a man who will likely function as an accelerator on Trump's wildest instincts, and who will not hesitate to invalidate the Iran deal. The prospects for multilateralism look dim. "You can hear the shock in the Europeans' voices as they're saying goodbye to McMaster," a senior official said.

One of Bolton's first orders of business was to start dismissing people who had worked for McMaster. Bolton was said to be particularly interested in weeding out "Obama holdovers." Exiled Flynnstones began angling for a triumphant return to the Administration. If you were inclined to believe that McMaster had achieved anything of note

during his thirteen months in office, it was hard not to regard the Bolton appointment as Trump's repudiation of those achievements. Pollack told me that, policy matters aside, McMaster's focus on process and precedent was a worthy attempt to inculcate in the President a sense of civility and tradition. "That was the endless challenge—trying to convince Donald Trump to *live* in the house, rather than just burn it down," Pollack said. Alluding to Bolton's ascension, he concluded, "Unfortunately, I think we have our answer."

A few days before McMaster's departure, he gave a speech at the Atlantic Council, a think tank in Washington. He again criticized Russia as a nefarious actor, emphasizing its responsibility for the recent nerve-agent poisonings in England. The Trump Administration was introducing new sanctions against Russia, a development that might count as another success for McMaster, but he seemed to express some oblique frustration. "It is time that we expose those who glamorize and apologize in the service of Communist, authoritarian, and repressive governments," he declared, criticizing people who nurture "idealized" views of tyrannical regimes. It was as close as McMaster was likely to come to taking a public shot at Trump. "It was an angry speech," someone who worked for him told me. "You could tell from his delivery that there are areas in which he wanted to do more. It's clear that he has views that he isn't able to express."

McMaster will retire from the Army on June 1st. He will teach, give lectures, sit on corporate boards, and make money. Perhaps he will be haunted by his decision to remain obdurately loyal to Donald Trump. And perhaps he will write another book—one that interrogates his own calibration of the balance between duty and honor in the service of a President who didn't want to be challenged. For an old soldier like McMaster, the very notion of civilian life may seem mystifying. Years ago, he was asked what he would do if he ever left the Army. "It's so hard for me to imagine," he said. ♦



A THEORY OF RELATIVITY

Japan's rent-a-family phenomenon.

BY ELIF BATUMAN

Two years ago, Kazushige Nishida, a Tokyo salaryman in his sixties, started renting a part-time wife and daughter. His real wife had recently died. Six months before that, their daughter, who was twenty-two, had left home after an argument and never returned.

"I thought I was a strong person," Nishida told me, when we met one night in February, at a restaurant near a train station in the suburbs. "But when you end up alone you feel very lonely." Tall and slightly stooped, Nishida was wearing a suit and a gray tie. He had a deep voice and a gentle, self-deprecating demeanor.

Of course, he said, he still went to work every day, in the sales division of a manufacturing company, and he had friends with whom he could go out for drinks or play golf. But at night he was completely alone. He thought he would feel better over time. Instead, he felt worse. He tried going to hostess clubs. Talking to the ladies was fun, but at the end of the night you were alone again, feeling stupid for having spent so much money.

Then he remembered a television program he had seen, about a company called Family Romance, one of a number of agencies in Japan that rent out replacement relatives. One client, an elderly woman, had spoken enthusiastically about going shopping with her rental grandchild. "The grandchild was just a rental, but the woman was still really happy," Nishida recalled.

Nishida contacted Family Romance and placed an order for a wife and a daughter to join him for dinner. On the order form, he noted his daughter's age, and his wife's physique: five feet tall and a little plump. The cost was forty thousand yen, about three hundred and seventy dollars. The first meeting took place at a café. The rental daughter was more fashionable than

Nishida's real daughter—he used the English word "sharp"—but the wife immediately impressed him as "an ordinary, generic middle-aged woman." He added, "Unlike, for example, Ms. Matsumoto"—he nodded toward my interpreter, Chie Matsumoto—"who might look like a career woman." Chie, a journalist, teacher, and activist, who has spiky salt-and-pepper hair and wears plastic-framed glasses, laughed as she translated this qualification.

The wife asked Nishida for details about how she and the daughter should act. Nishida demonstrated the characteristic toss of the head with which his late wife had rearranged her hair, and his daughter's playful way of poking him in the ribs. Then the women started acting. The rental wife called him Kazu, just as his real wife had, and tossed her head to shake back her hair. The rental daughter playfully poked him in the ribs. An observer would have taken them for a real family.

Nishida booked a second meeting. This time, the wife and daughter came to his house. The wife cooked *okonomiyaki*, a kind of pancake that Nishida's late wife had made, while Nishida chatted with the daughter. Then they ate dinner together and watched television.

More family dinners followed, usually at Nishida's house, though one time they went out for *monjayaki*, another variety of pancake beloved by the late Mrs. Nishida. It hadn't been a fancy meal, and Nishida wondered whether he should have taken the women, who were, after all, his guests, to a nicer place. Then again, in real life, the Nishidas hadn't gone to any of those nicer places.

Before another meeting, it occurred to Nishida to send Family Romance a copy of his house key. When he came home from work that night, the lights were on, the house was warm, and a wife and daughter were there to say, "Welcome home."

"That was very nice," Nishida recalled, smiling slightly. He said he didn't miss the women when they left—not with any sense of urgency or longing. But he did think, "It would be nice to spend some time like that with them again."

Nishida said that, although he still calls them by the names of his wife and daughter, and the meetings still take the form of family dinners, the women have, to some extent, stopped acting and "turned into their own selves." The rental wife sometimes "breaks out of the shell of the rental family" enough to complain about her real husband, and Nishida gives her advice. With this loosening of the roles, he realized that he, too, had been acting, playing the part of "a good husband and father," trying not to seem too miserable, telling his daughter how to hold her rice bowl. Now he felt lighter, able for the first time to talk about his real daughter, about how shocked he had been when she announced her decision to move in with a boyfriend he had never met, and how they had argued and broken off contact.

On the subject of the real daughter, the rental daughter had a lot to say: as someone in her early twenties, she could tell that Nishida hadn't spoken correctly, or expressed himself in the right way. He'd made it hard for his daughter to apologize and it was up to him to create an opening. "Your daughter is waiting for you to call her," she told him. To me, this sentence had the eerie ring of something uttered at a séance. Nishida himself seemed uncertain about how and for whom the rental daughter had spoken. "She was acting as a rental daughter, but at the same time she was telling me how she felt as a real daughter," he said. "And yet, if it was a real father-daughter relationship, maybe she wouldn't have spoken this honestly."

Eventually, Nishida called his daughter—something he says he wouldn't



The head of one rental-relative company described the service as “human affection expressed through the form of the family.”



"Once you've read your favorite authors on a little illuminated screen, you can't go back."

have done if the rental substitute hadn't helped him see her point of view. It took a few tries to get through, but they were eventually able to talk. One day, he came home from work to find fresh flowers for his wife on the family altar, and he understood that his daughter had been at the house while he was gone.

"I've been telling her to come home," he said carefully, folding and refolding a hand towel that the waitress had brought him. "I'm hoping to meet her again soon."

Yūichi Ishii, the founder of Family Romance, told me that he and his "cast" actively strategize in order to engineer outcomes like Nishida's, in which the rental family makes itself redundant in the client's life. His goal, he said, is "to bring about a society where no one needs our service." A handsome man in his mid-thirties, he came to one of our meetings straight from a TV interview, wearing a pin-striped suit and matching cufflinks and tie pin that featured a blue cameo with a horse.

His business card has a cartoon of his face on it, and a slogan that translates as "More pleasure than the pleasure reality can provide."

Born in Tokyo, Ishii grew up on the Chiba coast, where his father was a fruit dealer and his mother taught swimming. When he was in elementary school, his friends would gather around a pay phone to listen to him make prank calls, disguising his voice as a grownup's; only he could make such calls without laughing. At twenty, he was scouted by a talent agency, and got a few jobs as a model and a movie extra. He also had regular work as a caregiver for the elderly. He showed me pictures on his phone of his younger self at different senior-home festivities, dressed variously as Marilyn Manson or in drag, surrounded by delighted residents. He loved the feeling of helping people, and was proud of being the most requested caregiver, even when residents were transferred to different facilities. In effect, he was already a rental grandson.

Eleven years ago, a friend of Ishii's, a single mother, told him that she was

having trouble getting her daughter into a competitive kindergarten, because schools favored children whose parents were married. Ishii volunteered to impersonate the child's father at a school interview. The interview was not a success—the daughter wasn't used to him and their interaction was stilted—but it filled him with the desire to do better, and to "correct injustice" by helping other women in his friend's situation. Looking around to see whether anyone had thought to start a professional service of this kind, he came across the Web site of a rental-relative agency called Hagemashi-tai.

Hagemashi-tai, which can be translated as "I want to cheer you up," was started in 2006 by Ryūichi Ichinokawa, a middle-aged former salaryman with a wife and two sons. Five years earlier, Ichinokawa had been deeply shaken by news of a stabbing at a private elementary school in a suburb of Osaka, in which eight children around his sons' age were killed. Such incidents are rare in Japan, and schools weren't equipped with appropriate counselling services, so Ichinokawa enrolled in a psychology course, hoping to become a school counsellor. Instead, he ended up launching a Web site that offered counselling by e-mail. From there, he branched out into renting relatives. A lot of problems, it seemed, were caused by some missing person, and often the simplest solution was to find a substitute.

Ishii registered with Hagemashi-tai, but, at twenty-six, he was considered too young for husband and father roles, and his only jobs were as a wedding guest. Weddings are the bread and butter of the rental-relative business, perhaps because traditions that dictate the number of guests haven't changed to reflect increasing urbanization and migration, shrinking families, and decreased job security. Laid-off grooms rent replacements for co-workers and supervisors. People who changed schools a lot rent childhood friends. The newly affianced, reluctant to trouble one another with family problems, may rent substitutes for parents who are divorced, incarcerated, or mentally ill. One Hagemashi-tai client simply didn't want to tell his fiancée that his parents were dead, so he rented replacements.

In 2009, Ishii decided to start his

own company. The first step was to think up a memorable name. He began researching phrases related to the idea of an imaginary family, and came across “The Family Romance of Neurotics,” an essay by Freud, published in 1909, about children who believe that their parents are impostors, and that their real parents are nobles or royals. According to Freud, this fantasy is a child’s way of coping with the inevitable, painful experience of disillusionment in his or her parents. If parents never stopped appearing as all-powerful, generous, and infallible, as they do to their small children, nobody would ever become independent; yet how can anyone bear the sudden, irretrievable loss of such beloved beings? The “family romance” allows the child to hold on to the ideal a bit longer, by reassigning it to “new and aristocratic parents”—whose wonderful characteristics, Freud wrote, are always “derived entirely from real recollections of the actual and humble ones.” In this sense, the child is not “getting rid of” the parents but “exalting” them, and the whole project of replacing the parents with superior versions “is only an expression of the child’s longing for the happy, vanished days when his father seemed to him the noblest and strongest of men and his mother the dearest and loveliest of women.”

Ishii runs Family Romance alongside a talent agency and a tech consultancy, employing about twenty full-time staff members, seven or eight of whom work exclusively for Family Romance. He maintains a database of some twelve hundred freelance actors. Big one-time jobs, like weddings, account for about seventy per cent of Family Romance’s revenue. The rest comes from personal relationships that may, as in Kazushige Nishida’s case, continue for years.

Ishii told me that, since 2009, he has played the husband to a hundred women. About sixty of those jobs were ongoing. At one point, early in his career, he was in ten families at the same time. It was not a sustainable workload. “You feel like you have someone’s life on your shoulders,” he said. He has since implemented a policy that no actor may play more than five roles at a time.

One of the hazards of the job is cli-

ent dependency. Ishii says that between thirty and forty per cent of the women in ongoing relationships with rental husbands eventually propose marriage. Male clients have less opportunity to become dependent, because rental wives, for safety reasons, rarely visit men at home; Nishida’s wife and daughter made an exception because there were two of them. In general, rental partners and spouses aren’t supposed to be alone with clients one on one, and physical contact beyond hand-holding is not allowed.

The most difficult dependency situations involve single mothers. “We can’t just push them away and say ‘No, we can’t do that’ in a cold way, because we have a responsibility that we will play that role for a long time,” Ishii said. In such cases, his first step is to reduce the frequency of meetings to once every three months. This approach works with some people, but others insist on more frequent meetings. Occasionally, relationships have to be terminated.

In Tokyo this winter, I met with cast members from both Family Romance and Hagemashi-tai. They had attended weddings, spiritual seminars, job fairs, standup-comedy contests, and the album releases of teen idols. One woman had been impersonating a man’s wife for seven years: the real wife had put on weight, so the husband hired the stand-in to go out with him and his friends. The same actress had also replaced overweight mothers at school events; the children of overweight parents may be subject to bullying. Ichinokawa and Ishii told me many more stories. A hostess in a cabaret club hired a client to request her. A blind woman rented a seeing friend to identify the good-looking men at a singles dance. A pregnant woman rented a mother to persuade her boyfriend to acknowledge their child, and a young man rented a father to conciliate the parents of his pregnant lover.

Single women with marriage-obsessed parents often rent fake boyfriends or fiancés. If the parents demand to see the boyfriend again, the woman will typically stall for a while, and then say things didn’t work out. But sometimes the parents can’t be put off and matters escalate. Ishii says that, two or three times a year, he stages entire fake wed-

dings. The cost is around five million yen (around forty-seven thousand dollars). In some cases, the bride invites real co-workers, friends, and family members. In others, everyone is an actor except the bride and her parents. The rental best man gives a speech, often bringing the rental guests to tears. When Ishii plays the groom, he experiences complicated emotions. A fake wedding, he says, is just as much work to organize as a real one, and he and the client plan together for months. Invariably, Ishii says, “I start to fall for her.” When it comes to the kiss, some brides prefer to fake it—they touch cheeks so it looks like they’re kissing—but others opt for the real thing. Ishii tries to pretend he’s acting in a movie, but often, he says, “I feel like I’m really getting married to this woman.”

Of all the services offered by Family Romance, the most perplexing to me was “Rental Scolder.” Scolders are hired not, as I had assumed, by clients wishing to berate third parties but by people who “made a mistake” and need help to “atone.” One actor, Taishi, a mild-mannered forty-two-year-old fitness instructor, told me about his first such role. The client, a company founder in his late fifties, complained of losing his “forward-looking motivation.” He had stopped joining his employees at meetings or for drinks. Instead, delegating his responsibilities to subordinates, he played golf and visited hostess clubs on the company tab. The company’s accountant knew about these charges, so the employees probably knew, too, and this made him feel ashamed.

Taishi, impressed by this level of self-knowledge and reluctant to shout at a company president fifteen years his senior, suggested that the client simply join the workers for a meeting or a drink, and stop charging personal expenses to the company. In response, the man launched into a diatribe about the correct distance between a president and the workers, explaining that any variation would intimidate the staff. He refused to go to even one meeting to see whether or not anyone was intimidated. As they talked in circles, Taishi found himself growing irritated. “I said, ‘Well, why did you send us this request if you aren’t listening to me?’” Only

half-acting, he pounded on the table. “The problem is with your hard head,” he declared, and threw the straw from his soft drink across the room.

Rental apologies, the obverse of rental scoldings, can be particularly thorny. Ishii outlined some possible scenarios. If you make a mistake at work, and a disgruntled client or customer demands to see your supervisor, you can hire Ishii to impersonate the supervisor. Ishii, identifying himself as a department head, will then apologize. If the apology isn’t accepted, a different actor can be sent to apologize as the division head. If the division head doesn’t get results, Ishii dispatches a remorseful president. These situations can get complicated, because the real department heads and presidents aren’t aware that they have apologized. Sometimes, if an offended party hasn’t actually met the offender, Ishii stands in for the offender, who then pretends to be Ishii’s supervisor. Ishii grovels and trembles on the floor while being yelled at, as the real culprit looks on. Ishii says that these scenes give one a surreal, dream-like, unpleasant feeling.

More stressful still are apologies involving affairs. A deceived husband sometimes demands a personal apology from his wife’s lover. Unfaithful wives with uncoöperative lovers may rent substitutes. Ishii’s tactic, in these situations, is to apply a temporary tattoo to his neck and dress like a yakuza. He goes to the couple’s house, and, when the husband opens the door, he falls to his knees and apologizes profusely. The idea seems to be to defuse potential violence through a combination of surprise, fear, and flattery. If the lover is married, the wronged husband may demand a meeting with both the lover and the lover’s wife, hoping to see his rival’s marriage destroyed. So lovers whose wives don’t know about their affairs end up renting substitute wives. One actress I met described the lover’s-wife roles as her worst assignments: in addition to making her feel guilty and terrible, they tended to run overtime, and the husbands shouted and behaved aggressively.



Another rental agency offers a more specialized service: its name, Ikemeso Takkyūbin, means “handsome men weeping delivery.” Clients choose from a menu of handsome men corresponding to different types, including “little brother,” “tough guy,” “intellectual,” “swordsman,” “mixed race,” and, puzzlingly, “dentist.” The teenage-looking “dentist,” dwarfed in his picture by a radically foreshortened toothbrush he was holding up to the camera, was, I later learned, a real dentist.

Hiroki Terai, Ikemeso Takkyūbin’s founder, told me that the weeping service is an offshoot of another business venture: “divorce ceremonies,” which are intended to provide closure and relief from social stigma. In the past nine years, he has performed five hundred and thirty ceremonies. (For the four-hundredth ceremony, a husband, dressed as a human-size wedding bouquet, was attached to a bungee cord and pushed off a cliff by his soon-to-be ex-wife.) The ceremonies, which are often held in a dilapidated building, to “symbolize a marriage that’s falling apart,” include a slide show illustrating, with bullet points, where the marriage went wrong. Fifteen couples have got back together after the slide show. On occasion, women who are embarrassed about their divorces have hired rental relatives to attend.

Early on, Terai told me, he was struck by the large number of men who wept at divorce ceremonies—“The women are usually O.K., but the men are bawling,” he said—and by how relieved they looked afterward. Realizing that he himself hadn’t cried in about five years, Terai searched YouTube for tear-inducing videos, and found a Thai life-insurance commercial about a girl who didn’t appreciate the love of her deaf-mute father. Terai cried, and felt that a burden had been lifted.

He coined a phrase, *rui-katsu*—“communal crying”—and started a new business, leading weeping sessions at corporations, in order to boost team spirit. Today, there are some forty organizations holding *rui-katsu* workshops in Japan, most of them unaffiliated with

Terai. In addition to ninety-minute corporate sessions, Terai makes a yearly trip to Iwaki, a city in Fukushima Prefecture, to run a *rui-katsu* session with earthquake survivors.

Terai, now thirty-seven, says that attitudes toward men crying have changed since his childhood. As an experiment, he asked younger women what they would think of a man who cried. All of them said that they would think he was sensitive and kind—provided that he was also good-looking. Having also heard from some female *rui-katsu* participants that the service would be improved if a handsome man wiped away their tears, Terai felt professionally obliged to start dispatching handsome men to help people cry.

I had asked to try the service, and selected the “swordsman,” whom Terai took me to meet in a hotel lobby. (My translator, Chie, expressed surprise when I declined to book an eight-thousand-yen private room for my weeping session; I assured her that, though the swordsman was a novelty, it would be neither my first nor, in all likelihood, my last time crying in public.) The swordsman, a willowy youth with chiselled features and an expression of great sensitivity, wore a garment made by a designer specializing in modernistic reinterpretations of traditional Japanese dress. He began our session by reading me a children’s book in which a little boy in Fukushima writes a letter to his grandmother and her dog, who have been washed away in the tsunami.

“Are you crying?” Terai asked. “You have to cry, or he can’t wipe away your tears.” The swordsman, who is also a freelance model, looked solicitously into my face, holding a crisply ironed blue-and-white striped handkerchief. I explained that I had felt close to tears when the grandmother and the dog received the letter in Heaven and it made the dog’s tail wag. “They all cry when the dog wags its tail,” the swordsman said, nodding knowledgeably.

Next, we all watched a YouTube video about a father who played the saxophone at his son’s wedding. I waited in dread for the father to turn out to have cancer. Suddenly, the video was over. Nothing bad had happened. But when I looked up I saw a perfectly formed tear rolling toward the swordsman’s jaw.

Chie, too, was crying. Terai explained that, for him, the really tear-inducing moment was when it transpired that the groom's sisters had secretly prepared a piano accompaniment to the father's saxophone solo.

All the same, Terai wanted to take pictures of the swordsman drying my tears. "Just try to look sad," he said. I looked at the floor and the swordsman leaned toward me with the handkerchief. He told me about his audition for the weeping service, which had been recorded by a news program. To his mortification, he had been unable to cry for the camera: "I had tears in the corner of my eye, but they didn't overflow."

"The tear has to roll down the face," Terai said. But he had given the swordsman another chance. "He couldn't cry then, but I could imagine his crying face," he said. "And when I saw him cry I was exactly right."

My next appointment, with Family Romance, was two hours with a rental mother, in the shopping district of Shibuya. I had been anxious about it even before I got to Japan. The day before my departure, my real mother wrote me a wonderful e-mail, wishing me a good trip and alluding, as I knew she would, to one of our favorite books, "The Makioka Sisters," a family novel written, in the nineteen-forties, by Junichiro Tanizaki. My mother had given me her copy when I was in middle school, and part of what I had loved about it was how similar the sisters' shared language and private jokes seemed to our own. Wasn't it because my mother had shared with me her love of Tanizaki and Kōbō Abe that I had become a writer, and was now able to visit many of the places we had read about together? It struck me as unfair that I was not only going to Japan without her but also plotting to rent a replacement.

One afternoon in Tokyo, on a commuter train, Chie helped me fill out the order form. "There's a space here for your fond childhood memories," she said. I found myself telling her about the day when I was three or four and my mother, a young doctor, who worked long hours, came home early and took me out to buy a doll stroller. This unhopd-for happiness was somehow in-

tensified by the unnecessaryness, the surplus value, of the doll stroller. "The day we got the stroller," "the stroller day," became shorthand for . . . what? For a happy day, though I remember at a later date asking my mother why mentioning it always felt somehow sad. I was worried that she would tell me not to be morbid, not to find ways to be sad about things that were happy. Instead she said, without missing a beat, "Because why wasn't every day the stroller day?"

I met the rental mother in the café of a department store. I hadn't seen her picture, so it took some time to identify the right person: a petite, middle-aged Japanese woman, her long hair dyed the color of honey. She stood as I approached.

"Mom!" I exclaimed, beaming.

She returned my embrace, a shade distantly. "So how should we do this?" she asked, speaking in unaccented American English. "Would you like to

interview me, or do you want to do the role-playing?"

Having booked her for two hours, I suggested that we might do both. "This is a little bit weird for me, because usually when I play a mother the daughter is in her twenties," she said, adding that she was fifty-six, which made her only sixteen years older than me.

"Should I pretend to be in my twenties?" I asked.

"No, I can act older," she said. As our backstory, she proposed that my mother "had moved to Japan for some reason," and that we would be seeing each other for the first time in years. I agreed.

All of a sudden, her expression softened. "It's been such a long time since we've seen each other." Her voice, too, was softer, more wistful. I felt a mild jolt of emotion.

"It's been really long," I said.

"I don't know how much you remember. I don't know if you remember



Kanin

"Do you take recreational drugs, and, if so, which one would you recommend to someone new to that kind of thing who is looking for a fun, no-freakout kind of time?"

the times we spent together.” The sorrow in her voice made me think of my real mother when she talked about the time after my parents’ divorce, when I lived with my father.

“Of course I remember,” I said encouragingly, and even found myself trying to retrieve an actual memory, before I remembered that there were no actual memories, because we had only just met. “I mean . . . not in a very detailed way,” I added.

“Well, I remember every minute we spent together, and I cherish every minute. I only wish there had been more of them,” she said. “I didn’t have as much time to spend with you as I wanted, because of my work. That’s something I regret now.”

I felt a wave of panic, as if a fortune-teller had told me something eerily accurate.

“You had to work so hard,” I said.

“But what about *your* work? How do you cope with all the pressure?” she asked—and the spell was broken, because my real mother knows all about my work, and wouldn’t have asked me that. I found myself telling the rental

mother about the meditation app on my phone, and asking if she liked to meditate. “I guess we’re talking as ourselves now,” she said, echoing my thought.

I started to interview her. Her name was Airi and she had spent most of her childhood in the United States and Canada, because of her father’s work as a research physicist. In the seventies, she did some TV acting, playing a “happy Asian kid” in the background of sitcoms. When she was fourteen, her father sent her to Japan, to “go into the system.” Censured and ostracized for using English words, she learned to keep her mouth shut until she could speak perfect Japanese. After completing her education, she joined the corporate workforce, climbing to the upper levels of various international companies, before leaving her last position, two years ago.

Airi registered with Family Romance shortly afterward, and now gets a couple of assignments every month. She doesn’t have any children or close relatives; she lost her husband, her parents, and a hundred-and-ten-year-old

grandmother in a span of twenty years. Sometimes the young women who rent her as a mother talk about “the b.s. they take at work.” Listening to their stories, so familiar from her own life, she finds herself able not only to imagine but to momentarily experience how it might have been if she hadn’t been too focussed on work to have children.

Despite their different personalities and backgrounds, I heard certain resemblances between Airi’s experiences and my mother’s. My mother had also overcome many professional barriers to reach a high level in her field, in a country different from the one she grew up in. She, too, had left her work recently. As Airi described the things she liked about her life and the things that could have been better, I felt a strange sense of relief: she had faced some of the same challenges as my mother, and she didn’t have a daughter; so it wasn’t having a daughter that caused the challenges.

We talked about the article I was interviewing her for. “I guess I’ll just be a few lines,” she said, and I suddenly started to feel guilty about my rental mother. I felt physical pain when she briefly alluded to her financial uncertainty and said that she couldn’t “go on living like this forever,” and when she proposed that I hire her as a translator and I had to tell her I already had one. The worst moment was when she mentioned that none of the daughters who’d hired her had ever asked to see her again, and I realized I wouldn’t be seeing her again, either. When she offered to show me around the department store even though our time was up, I found myself saying yes.

Following the Meiji Restoration, in 1868, reformers united Japan under a “restored” emperor, and, after centuries of isolationism and feudal rule, set about turning the country into a modern bureaucratic military power. They drafted a new civil code, making provisions for what Westerners called “the family”—a concept that had no definite legal reality in Japan, and could not be expressed by any single Japanese word. A new word, *kazoku*, was coined, and a “family system” was drawn up, based on a long-standing form of domestic organization: the *ie*, or house. A product,



“Look, maybe you came to the New World to put buckles all over your body. But that’s just not me.”

in part, of Confucian principles, the *ie* was rigidly hierarchical. The head controlled all the property, and chose one member of the younger generation to succeed him—usually the eldest son, though sometimes a son-in-law or even an adopted son. Continuity of the house was more important than blood kinship. The other members could either stay in the *ie*, marry into a new one (daughters), or start subsidiary branches (sons). Nationalist ideology of the Meiji era represented Japan as one big family, with the emperor as the head of the main house and every other household as a subsidiary branch. “Familism” became central to the national identity, and was contrasted with the selfish individualism of the West.

After the Second World War, a new constitution, drawn up during the Allied occupation, sought to supplant the *ie* with a Western-style, “democratic” nuclear family. Forced marriages were outlawed, spouses became legal equals, and property was distributed evenly among a couple’s children, regardless of gender and birth order. With post-war economic growth and the rise of corporate culture, *ie* households became less common, while apartment-dwelling nuclear households—consisting of a salaryman, a housewife, and their children—proliferated. During the economic boom of the eighties, women increasingly worked outside the home. The birth rate went down, while the divorce rate and the number of single-person households went up. So did life expectancy, and the proportion of older people.

That’s when the first wave of rental families appeared. In 1989, Satsuki Ōiwa, the president of a Tokyo company that specialized in corporate employee training, began to rent out children and grandchildren to neglected elders—an idea she got from hearing corporate workers fret about being too busy to visit their parents. Ōiwa’s service was widely covered in the press; within a few years, she had dispatched relatives to more than a hundred clients. One couple hired a son to listen to the father’s hard-luck stories. Their real son lived with them, but refused to listen to the stories. The couple’s real grandson, moreover, was now past infancy, and the grandparents missed touching



“Mini-cupcakes never solved anything.”

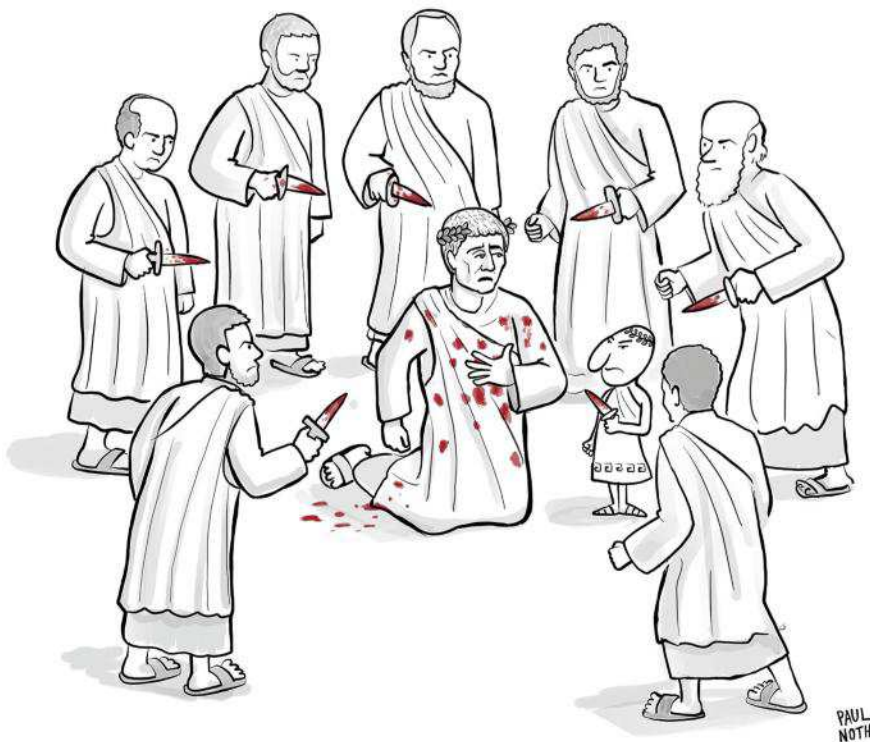
a baby’s skin. The price of a three-hour visit from a rental son and daughter-in-law, in possession of both an infant child and a high tolerance for unhappy stories, was eleven hundred dollars. Other clients included a young couple who rented substitute grandparents for their child, and a bachelor who rented a wife and daughter in order to experience having the kind of nuclear family he’d seen on TV.

The idea of rental relatives took root in the public imagination. Postmodernism was in the air, and, in an age of cultural relativism, rental relativism fit right in. In 1993, Misa Yamamura, a famous writer of detective fiction, published “Murder Incident of the Rental Family,” a mystery in which an elderly cancer patient avenges herself on a negligent son by mortgaging the family house and hiring a more attentive rental son, daughter-in-law, and grandson. After she is murdered, two copies of her will are found—one favoring the son, the other the rental relatives—dramatizing the tension between received pieties about filial love and the economic re-

lations that bind parents and children.

Since then, rental relatives have inspired a substantial literary corpus. In Tokyo, I met with the critic Takayuki Tatsumi, who, in the nineties, wrote a survey of the genre. He explained that postmodern and queer novelists had used rental relatives to represent the “virtual family,” an idea he traced back to the *ie* of the Meiji period, when adoption of family members was common and biological lineage was subordinated to the integrity of the household. “According to Foucault, everything is constructed, not essentially determined,” Tatsumi said. “What matters is the function.” I remembered a quote from Satsuki Ōiwa that I had read in a newspaper article about her. “What we provide is not familial affection,” she said, “but human affection expressed through the form of the family.”

Replacement or rental relatives continue to feature in literature and film, and appeared in three recent Japanese movies I saw on airplanes. In one comedy, “The Stand-In Thief,” an orphan with no relatives forms emotional bonds



"Et tu, Little Caesar?"

with a series of isolated strangers whom he meets while breaking into a house; in another, a stepfather pays his stepdaughter's deadbeat dad to spend time with her. The mood of these portrayals seemed to alternate between a kind of euphoria at the alchemy of the marketplace, which transforms strangers into loved ones, and a "Truman Show"-like paranoia that everyone you love is just playing a role.

Both the euphoria and the dread may have their origin in the deregulation of the Japanese labor market in the nineties, and in the attendant erosion of the postwar salaryman life style. Thirty-eight per cent of the workforce is now made up of nonregular workers. (Much Japanese press coverage of rental relatives presents the work as a "side job" that newspaper readers can use to supplement their income.) In 2010, single-person households began to outnumber nuclear families. In Japan, as elsewhere, today's young people have more opportunities for mobility and individual self-expression, but less experience of security, community, and family. Meanwhile, the ranks of the elderly are grow-

ing. Tatsumi showed me part of a 2008 movie in which an older woman deliberately lets a young con man scam her, because he reminds her of her dead son. The movie is set partly in a cardboard village for elderly homeless people, which really existed in Tokyo.

Like many aspects of Japanese society, rental relatives are often explained with reference to the binary of *honne* and *tatemae*, or genuine individual feelings and societal expectations. Authenticity and consistency aren't necessarily valued for their own sake, and the concealment of authentic *honne* behind conventional *tatemae* is often construed as an act of unselfishness and sociability, rather than of deception or hypocrisy. A case in point: the man who hired fake parents for his wedding because his real ones were dead eventually told his wife. It went fine. She said that she understood that his goal was not to deceive her but to avoid trouble at their wedding. She even thanked him for being so considerate.

Still, although it goes without saying that many aspects of the Japanese rental-relative business must be specific

to Japan, it is also the case that people throughout human history have been paying strangers to fill roles that their kinsfolk performed for free. Hired mourners existed in ancient Greece, Rome, and China, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and in the early Islamic world; they were denounced by Solon, by St. Paul, and by St. John Chrysostom. They still exist in China, India, and, lately, England, where an Essex-based service, Rent A Mourner, has been operating since 2013. And what are babysitters, nurses, and cooks if not rental relatives, filling some of the roles traditionally performed by mothers, daughters, and wives?

In fact, the idea that families are defined by "a love that money can't buy" is relatively recent. In preindustrial times, the basic economic unit was the family, and each new child meant another pair of hands. After industrialization, people started working outside the home for a fixed wage, and each new child meant another mouth to feed. The family became an unconditionally loving sanctuary in a market-governed world.

In 1898, the utopian feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote of "romantic love" and "maternal sacrifice" as ideological constructs: a bait and switch that kept women at home. Young girls were raised to value romance above all else and to cultivate their beauty to attract a husband—then, by an unspoken contract, with no preparation or training, they were expected to turn into full-time, unpaid nurses, educators, and housecleaners, driven by a "mysterious 'maternal instinct'" that automatically kicked in when the time came.

In late-nineteenth-century Japan, the state introduced a "romantic-love ideology," which defined the "ideal sequence of a woman's life" in similar terms: "romantic love (courtship)," followed by marriage, childbirth, the awakening of a "nurturing maternal love," and the triumphant assumption of a desexualized "caretaking role." So writes the anthropologist Akiko Takeyama, in a recent book about Tokyo host clubs, where women pay a cover charge to drink and chat with personable, attentive men. Some housewives have spent tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars on

their hosts, working extra jobs, economizing on groceries, or extorting their husbands. In this way, they experience “romance” for the first time since they became full-time caregivers and housekeepers, and their husbands started calling them “mother.”

In a sense, the idea of a rental partner, parent, or child is perhaps less strange than the idea that childcare and housework should be seen as the manifestations of an unpurchasable romantic love. Patriarchal capitalism has arguably had a vested interest in promoting the latter idea as a human universal: as the Marxist psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich pointed out, with women providing free housework and caregiving, capitalists could pay men less. There were other iniquities, too. As Gilman observed, when caregiving becomes the exclusive, unpaid purview of wives and mothers, then people without families don’t have access to it: “only married people and their immediate relatives have any right to live in comfort and health.” Her solution was that the unpaid work incumbent on every individual housewife—nursery education, household-work management, food preparation, and so on—should be distributed among paid specialists, of both genders. What often happens instead is that these tasks, rather than becoming respected, well-paid professions, are foisted piecemeal onto socioeconomically disadvantaged women, freeing their more privileged peers to pursue careers.

When Yūichi Ishii talks about “correcting injustice,” he seems to mean much the same thing as Charlotte Perkins Gilman. “Every human being needs a home,—bachelor, husband, or widower, girl, wife, or widow,” Gilman wrote. Thanks to Family Romance, someone like Kazushige Nishida, who loses his family, can rent a wife and a daughter, and, thereby, the comforts of home: varied pancakes, women’s voices saying “Welcome,” the occasional filial poke in the ribs.

Nine years ago, Reiko, a dental hygienist in her early thirties, contacted Family Romance to rent a part-time father for her ten-year-old daughter, Mana, who, like many children of single mothers in Japan, was experiencing

bullying at school. Reiko was presented with four candidates and chose the one with the kindest voice. The rental father has been visiting regularly ever since. Mana, now nineteen, still hasn’t been told that he isn’t her real father.

Chie and I met Reiko in a crowded tearoom near Tokyo Station. The meeting had been arranged by Ishii, who said he’d be joining us later. Reiko, now forty, was wearing a simple navy sweater, a plaid scarf, and a marvellous aquamarine wool coat that looked like it was in softer focus than the rest of the room.

“This is the first time I’m telling my story,” she said in a low voice, glancing around the room. She explained that she had married Mana’s father, a man named Inaba, at the age of twenty-one, after discovering she was pregnant. He became abusive, and she divorced him shortly after giving birth. To Mana, Reiko said only that she and Mana’s father had had a disagreement long ago, when she was a baby. Mana took this to mean that she was to blame for her father leaving, and nothing Reiko said could change her mind.

At school, Mana was withdrawn, slow to make friends. By the age of ten, she avoided her classmates whenever possible, either spending all day in the school nurse’s office or staying at home in her room, rarely emerging except when Reiko was at work. When Mana had been avoiding school for three months, Reiko called Family Romance. On the order form—she had brought a copy of the seven-page computer printout to our meeting—she had described the father she wanted for her little girl. No matter what Mana said or did, Reiko had written, he should react with kindness.

When the new “Inaba” first came to visit, Mana was in her room, as usual, and wouldn’t open the door. Inaba finally opened the door a crack. He and Reiko could see Mana sitting on her bed, with the covers pulled over her head. After talking to her from the doorway, Inaba ventured inside, sat on the bed, stroked her arm, and apologized. Chie stopped when she got to that part of the translation, and I saw that her eyes were brimming with tears. After a moment, she got out the words that Inaba had spoken to Mana: “I’m

so sorry I didn’t come and meet you.”

Mana emerged from under the covers, but didn’t make eye contact. Inaba, noticing a poster on the wall for the boy band Arashi, told her that he had once been an extra in an Arashi video. That’s when Mana finally looked at him. “How much of what he says is true?” Reiko remembered wondering, from the hallway.

After what felt like hours, Inaba and Mana came downstairs, and they all had an “incredibly awkward lunch.” Reiko cleaned up in the kitchen, leaving Inaba and Mana together. They found the Arashi video on YouTube. Inaba really did seem to be in it, just for a second. At the end of the prearranged four hours, he stood up, and Mana, who had seemed almost cheerful, grew suspicious: “Oh, you’re leaving—so who are you?”

Reiko decided to hire Inaba on a regular basis—about twice a month, for four- or eight-hour stints, at a cost of twenty or forty thousand yen. To afford it, Reiko spent less on food and started buying all her clothes at a flea market. One evening, after three or four months, she came home from work and asked Mana how her day was, and, for the first time in years, Mana answered, telling her what she had been watching on TV. I saw Reiko’s face light up when she talked about the transformation that took place when Mana “finally learned that her father was worried about her,” and “she became a normal, outgoing, happy kid.” Reiko started booking Inaba months in advance, for birthdays, parent-teacher nights, even for day trips to Disneyland or nearby hot springs. To explain why they could never spend a night together, Reiko told Mana that Inaba had remarried and had a new family.

When I asked Reiko if she planned to tell Mana the truth someday, her eyes filled with tears. “No, I can never tell her,” she said, and then started to laugh. “Sometimes I wish Inaba-san would marry me,” she said, through tears and laughter. “I don’t know if I should say this, but *I’m* also happy when he comes to see us. It’s only a limited time, but I can be very, very happy. Honestly, he’s a very nice man. Maybe you’ll see.”

Reiko, it turned out, had been told that Inaba might join us at the

tearoom. When we said that we thought the person who was coming was Ishii, she said that she didn't know anything about such a person. "I think Inaba-san and Ishii-san might be the same person," Chie said. Reiko seemed skeptical: she didn't think Inaba was the president of Family Romance. For a while, we all just sat there, stirring our sweetened yuzu infusions.

Then Ishii was walking toward our table, wearing a dark blazer over a black turtleneck. "Inaba-san!" Reiko exclaimed.

Ishii introduced himself, addressing Reiko politely, with the Japanese formal address. She reacted with playful outrage: usually, they spoke to each other as husband and wife.

Now they sat side by side, across the table from me and Chie, not looking at each other. The understanding had been that after Ishii joined us I could interview them together, but they seemed to be operating on such different premises that, for a moment, it felt impossible to address even one sentence to them both.

"Have you wondered about Inaba-san's real name, and what he does in the rest of his life?" I asked Reiko finally.

She said that she hadn't, and she didn't wonder now; she felt like she already knew. "I think he doesn't change," she said. "He's very natural. Now I see him like this and it's the same." Ishii smilingly protested, reminding her that today she was his client, not his wife.

"You have something here," Reiko said, pointing to the corner of her mouth, and he reflexively turned toward a mirror and wiped his mouth. It was the first of several moments when he seemed to visibly toggle between Ishii and Inaba.

Reiko and Ishii began reminiscing about their first lunch together with Mana. Reiko had prepared way too much food—fried prawns, roast beef, corn soup, all things that Mana liked—and Ishii recalled that he had decided to try to "eat like a father," which, to him, meant "with no hesitation or concerns." To demonstrate, he leaned over the table, stuck out an elbow, and made a shovelling

motion. The effect was patriarchal. Reiko laughed with delight. Her eyes met mine, and I beamed back at her. I wasn't faking—it was a real smile. But what was I smiling at?

I asked about the relationship between a real family and a rental one. Ishii replied that, although a rental family wasn't real, it could in some sense be "more than a family." This notion struck me as somewhat abstruse, but Reiko said she understood perfectly. "If I hadn't gotten a divorce and was still married, I don't think that I would be laughing like this, or that I would be feeling this happy," she said. "It's not necessarily the case that the real family is the best thing that happens."

Eventually, she got up to leave. As she put on her aquamarine coat, she said she felt very refreshed. Her face looked radiant, more mobile and alive than when we had met. Watching her go gave me a painful feeling. I could feel how much she loved him—his square shoulders in the dark blazer.

Ishii excused himself to go to the bathroom, and Chie and I wondered aloud why Ishii had chosen to reveal his true identity to Reiko in our presence. Maybe he had needed outsiders to give credence to what he was trying to tell her: that he was running a big, ambitious, significant business, that their relationship wasn't real, that they were never going to be married. When he returned to the table, I asked whether he had told Reiko that he thought they should stop Inaba's visits.

He said that he had. Mana would soon be twenty. "If Mana got married and had kids, I would have grandchildren," he said. Grandchildren were wonderful, of course, but they would unavoidably repre-

sent more people in the world that one had to lie to—not to mention Mana's husband and in-laws. "Before that point, I tell Reiko, she needs to tell her."

"Do you think Reiko will agree?" I asked.

Ishii hesitated, and said, "Reiko probably has a very strong feeling that she wants to continue."

He said he honestly thought that

Mana would understand if they told her the truth. I wondered if there was a way to make Mana see this as a story about a mother who adored her, and a sort of limited guy who, in his own limited way, had shown her kindness and stability. Sure, he charged fifty dollars an hour, but the world was full of people who were incapable of being kind and present no matter how much you paid them. Was kindness invalidated just because money changed hands?

"I've been asked why I don't get married," Ishii said. Even though he's single, he has met scores of fiancées' parents, kissed a dozen brides, apologized for cheating, even attended a childbirth. He's sat through private-school interviews and parent-teacher meetings, video-recorded sports festivals and graduations, spent days at Disneyland. If he ever becomes a father, how will his feelings toward his own children be different from what he felt on the job? "I'm worried now that I might just end up *acting* a good father," he said.

Sometimes he has dreams about Mana, in which he tells her that he isn't her real father. "It's a dream, so she accepts it," he said. "She accepts the truth, but then she says, 'Even then, you're still my dad.'"

"Do you believe that there's a sense in which you *are* her father?" I asked.

Ishii closed his eyes, looking tired. "It proves a possibility that—even if we're not a real family, even if it's a rental family—the way we interact with each other makes this a form of a family."

One evening, back at my hotel, feeling jet-lagged and confused by all the stories I had been hearing, I decided to splurge on an in-room massage. Unlike the sessions with the weeping swordsman and the rental mother, a massage wouldn't count as a work expense. On the other hand, I reasoned, I had missed a shrink appointment back in New York, which cost more than the massage, so I was really saving money.

Two hours later, a smiling young woman knocked on the door, waited to be asked inside, took off her shoes, and gave me a form to sign. The form said that I agreed not to demand a sexual massage, and that if I was a man I





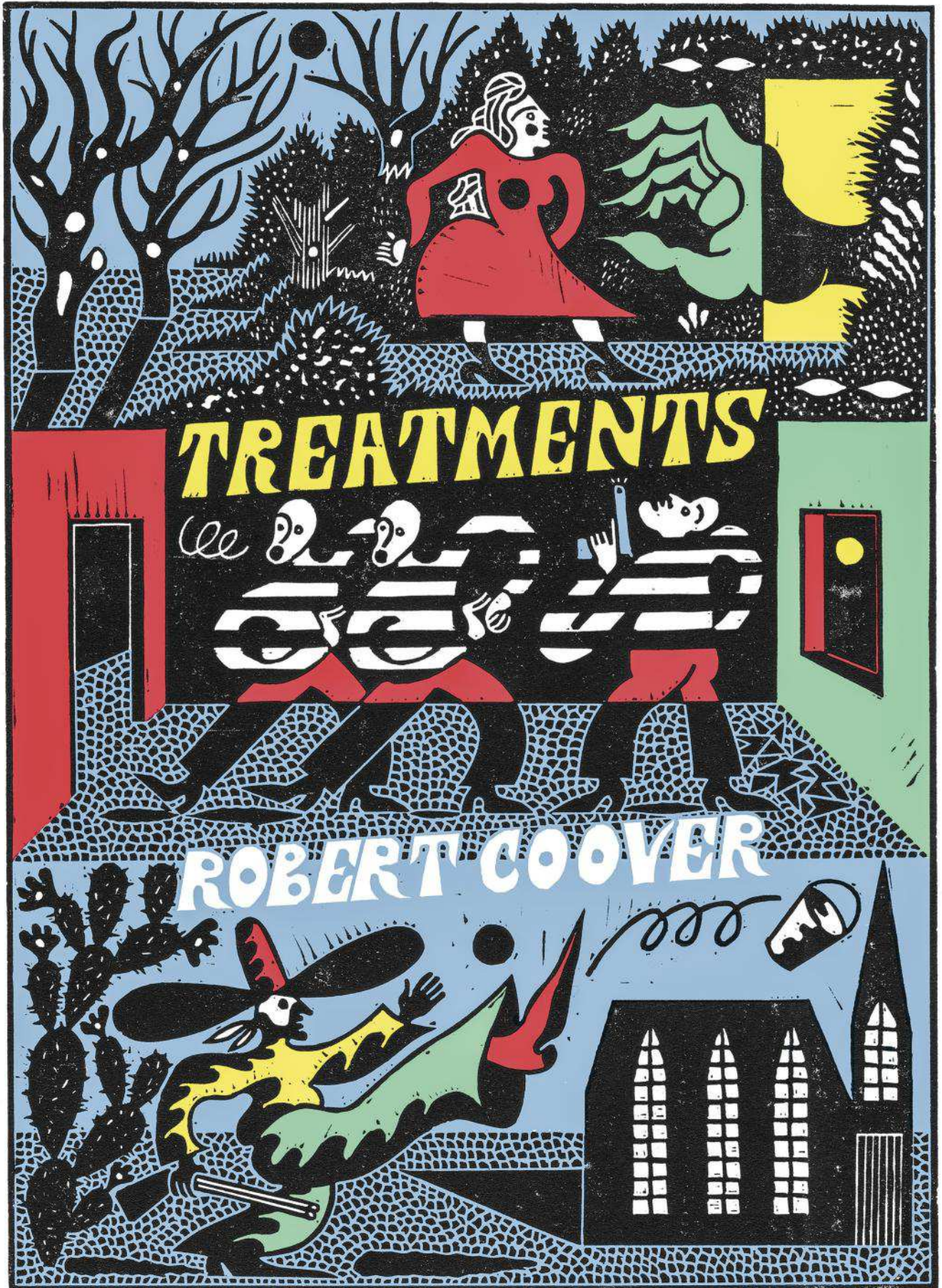
would keep the hotel-room door ajar. Everything contributed to the dream-like atmosphere: her soft voice and sure touch, the fact that I was lying on the bed, and the compactness of Tokyo hotel rooms, which meant that she periodically had to move things around to make enough room to stand. At some point, I realized that she was kneeling next to me on the bed. How strange that it was somehow O.K. for us to be in bed like this together. “Your shoulders are so hard!” she said, somehow releasing the muscles with her fingers. I felt full of love and gratitude, and thought about how the fact that I was paying her, which could have felt uncomfortable, was instead a source of joy and relief, because it meant that I didn’t have to think about anything at all. I could just relax. It felt like unconditional love—the kind you don’t get, or ask for, from people in your life, because they have needs, too, and you always have to take turns. I didn’t have to give *her* a massage or listen to her problems, because I had given her money, with which she could do anything she wanted: pay bills, buy an aquamarine coat, or even hire someone to give her a massage or listen to her problems. This hour, during which she paid attention to me and I didn’t pay attention to her, wasn’t going to be entered in a ledger where she could accumulate resentment toward me over the years. I didn’t have to feel guilty: that was what I was paying for.

I’d started off assuming that the rental schema somehow undercut the idea of unconditional love. Now I found myself wondering whether it was even possible to get unconditional love without paying. The questions I’d been asking myself about what Ishii really felt for Reiko and her daughter made more sense when I thought about them in these terms. A person can do things professionally—for a set time, in exchange for money and recognition—that she can’t do indefinitely for free. I knew that Ishii had put a lot of preparation into his job, watching family movies to learn how “a kind father” would walk, talk, and eat. Likewise, I had read about a host-club worker who studied romance novels in order to be able to anticipate and fulfill his clients’ every need, and consequently had no time left for a personal life. “Women’s ideal romance entails hard work,” he said, “and that is nearly impossible in the real world.” He said he could never have worked so hard for a real girlfriend.

I thought about my missed shrink appointment, and about a psychology professor I met, Kenji Kameguchi, who has been trying for the past thirty years to popularize family therapy in conflict-averse, stoical Japan, where psychotherapy is still stigmatized. He said that he thought rental relatives were, in an unschooled way, fulfilling some of the functions of group-therapy techniques such as psychodrama, in which patients act out and improvise one another’s

past situations or mental processes. Dramatic reenactments can help people in a way that talking with them can’t, because even when we are unable to tell someone what our problem is—because it’s too terrible to say, or because we don’t have the right words, or because we don’t know what it is—we can still act it out with another person. In this light, transference, a key element of Freudian psychotherapy, may be viewed as a process by which the therapist becomes the patient’s rental relative—as Freud put it, “the reincarnation of some important figure out of his childhood or past.”

Thinking about transference, I found myself wondering who the masseuse was a substitute for. The swordsman who didn’t succeed in making me cry? The psychotherapist whom I hadn’t been able to see that week? The parents whose relationship to my childhood self I had presumably hired the therapist to replay? It was, I realized, with a falling sensation, *turtles all the way down*. My next thought was whether it was possible, in Tokyo, to rent a turtle. After the masseuse left, I looked it up. Two clicks later, I was reading about the Yokohama Subtropical Teahouse, where, for the price of a pot of tea, visitors may handle a variety of land turtles. The article was accompanied by a photograph of a leopard tortoise climbing on top of a larger, African spurred tortoise, which it seemed to have mistaken for the world. ♦



They are on a film lot, walking through a pre-shoot reading of a script that calls for a brave traveller—"That's you, kid," the director says, leading her forward with an arm around her shoulders—to be lured to the edge of a deep, mysterious forest, known portentously as the Forest of Time. The forest is fake, deep as a painted scrim, but the director has told them that a real forest from Transylvania will be pasted in later, and they have all been asked to bat at the air around their faces, as if to brush away foliage, bugs, bats, clinging cobwebs. "Out, out, damned spot, I say!" an actor screams in falsetto, batting wildly, and everyone laughs. The actor, who has a bit part in the film, as the enchanted prince, smirks shyly, blinking his long lashes. He's a cute boy, but too full of himself. And just a runt. He'll have to stand on a chair for their happily-ever-after smooch once she's freed the Beast from his spell and let the prince out. The industry is obsessed with this hackneyed tale, once inflicted upon young virgins to prepare them for marriage to feeble old buzzards with money. She used to raise hell about such things. Now she doesn't really care. "The gutsy heroine knows that many have perished here," the continuity girl says, reading from the script, "victims of the absolute evil that is believed to pervade the treacherous Forest of Time." "Oh, the horror, the horror!" growls the actor playing the Beast, wearing his shaggy gorilla suit, but holding the head on his knee like a trophy. "Who wrote this shit?" an actress wants to know. One of Beauty's ugly sisters. Already into her sneering role. "I put the words in," the writer confesses, "but the producers told me which ones to use." They are all laughing, she is laughing, if you can't laugh you're fucked, she knows that, but she doesn't feel like laughing. It's the damned Beast, messing with her mood. Not the costumed actor, a bearded creep given to chummy slaps on the fanny (she's learned to keep her back turned away), but the maddeningly empty eyes in the hairy head on his lap. "I think this is going to have a bad ending," she says to no one in

particular, and with effort looks away. She is Beauty, though she's no longer beautiful, if she ever was (makeup and wardrobe will do what they can), and it is she, just by being who and what she is supposed to be, who moves the tale along, making the inevitable happen. It's her destiny. The trap she's in. "Sure you're ready for this?" her father asks beside her. The actor playing Beauty's father. "Why shouldn't I be?" Decent enough old fellow, showing concern. But what does he really want? She feels vaguely threatened. "The scary part," she says with a shudder, "is when you realize something truly horrible is happening—and you still want it." "Oh, wow!" It's that falsetto voice again. Heavy foot on the reverb pedal. A guy is roving about with a camera on his shoulder. She wonders if they're already shooting. "I remember doing this kind of thing in my back yard with my first camera, when I was a kid," he says. At the same time, he seems to be asking her if she's all right. "All I want," she tells him, entering the forest, "is to live happily ever after." "You are living happily ever after now," he shouts. "Don't get lost!" "Toilets are back to the left!" someone calls. "Let's get out of here," Beauty's father whispers, and takes her elbow, but she shakes him off. "I'm doing this for you," she says, trying to memorize each step forward so she can retrace her path, but forgetting each step as soon as it's taken. He's still there at her side, but then he isn't. It's growing darker, the deeper she goes. That's all right, she likes the darkness. Like time itself, she thinks, having no idea what she might mean. Though nothingness is part of it. She hesitates. She knows that she has reached an awful place because of the smell. Has she been here before? Life was so funny. Now it's not. She is lonely and afraid. Is that hollow laughter that she hears? No, she does not want to do this. She has to find the exit while she still can. As she turns to flee, the forest leans after her. In threat. In longing: he's here somewhere. She can hear him, rustling about in the depths, can feel the haunting presence of his vacant eyes. She bats against them, striking wildly at the night, like a fucking comedian. "Oh, I don't care," she says,

and turns back, stepping deeper into the darkening woods. She's not afraid. She comes upon a door. She opens it. He enters her. She can hardly breathe.

DESPERATE HOURS: THE MUSICAL

A ruthless gang of escaped convicts, led by a psychotic killer, is holding a couple hostage in their own suburban home. The gang's not sure what's supposed to happen next, but the boss has a plan. First, they need money, and there's some coming from somewhere; they have to wait for it. Waiting makes them nervous. Though the intruders are not very friendly, the lady of the house, hoping for the best, timorously offers them coffee and a plate of home-baked cookies. The snarling gang leader belts her one, sending her sprawling. The other two hoodlums snatch up the scattered cookies and chomp them voraciously with their mouths open, spewing crumbs, so as to further annoy the tearful housewife at their feet. They make vulgar remarks about her underwear, but when one of them lifts her skirt for a closer look, the gang leader slugs him. In that moment of distraction, the husband grabs the phone to call for help, but it's ripped from his hands and he is mercilessly pistol-whipped. Their two children come in to find both parents on the floor, their mother weeping, their father's head bloodied, three unshaven red-eyed bozos looming over them, their guns out. The thugs take an interest in the girl, but are wary of their puritanical boss. The boy takes an interest in the thugs, their scarred fists, their cocked weapons. He asks them if they're real desperadoes, and in reply the leader launches into a gruff aria in praise of pure, unmotivated violence. The other two join in for the chorus, which is a tuneless *thuck-thuck-thuck*, repeated rhythmically, while they smash their fists against their palms and shuffle menacingly around the room, side by side. One of them is the leader's portly kid brother, the other a sullen cop killer who joined them on the breakout. Their round bellies bounce to the rhythm of their shuffle, and, feeling the ecstasy of the harmonious moment, they drop their jaws and roll their eyes back. But their dance

is interrupted by the sudden bonging of the door chimes. They freeze, shrink back against the walls, eyes askint, their revolvers pointed at the captives. The boss grips the boy's neck in his clawlike hand, and walks him to the door. It's only a feeble old geezer on a cane. He cranes his neck around the gangster and the boy, trying to see what's going on inside. When the gang leader asks him how old he is, he grins a gap-toothed grin and says he's eighty-five, probably, or else eighty-six, he's not sure. "That's pretty fucking old, all right," the gangster says with a sneer, nodding at the other two, and they escort the old man through the kitchen into the attached garage. Two shots are heard. When the thugs return, they find their leader crumpled to his knees, clutching his head in both hands, gripped by a sudden insane craving for sugar. The terrified wife says she used up all the sugar for the cookies, but she'll go ask the neighbors. The leader rears up, whining with pain, and slaps her to the floor again. "Nobody leaves!" he bellows, pointing his gun at her. In a mad rage, whimpering pathetically, he spins around and, everyone ducking, shoots all the pictures on the walls. His kid brother, picking himself up after the rampage, tells him to cool it, he'll go find some goddam sugar, and, holstering his revolver under his armpit, he slips out the back. He's greeted next door by a gloomy housewife in an apron, a knotted bandanna on her head. He asks for a cup of sugar, showing her the gun, ready to kill her if necessary, but she shrugs and, pointing toward the kitchen, tells him to go help himself. He passes the bedroom and decides to rifle through it before getting the sugar. He finds jewelry, money, food stamps, a fur coat. He has both hands in her perfumed underwear drawer (feels so good, been so long) when she walks in on him. "Are you still here?" she asks wearily. He whips out his revolver, robed in fragrant silk, aims it at her. She ignores it, flopping down on the bed, forearm flung over her brow. "I'm so tired," she says, and breaks wistfully into a song about life's disappointments. "It's such shit!" she sings. He is also disappointed and joins her in the sad song. He has a sweeter, more mellifluous voice than his brother.

JUNE

There will never be more of summer than there is now. Walking alone through Union Square I am carrying flowers and the first rosé to a party where I'm expected. It's Sunday and the trains run on time but today death feels so far, it's impossible to go underground. I would like to say something to everyone I see (an entire city) but I'm unsure what it is yet. Each time I leave my apartment there's at least one person crying, reading, or shouting after a stranger anywhere along my commute. It's possible to be happy alone, I say out loud and to no one so it's obvious, and now here in the middle of this poem. Rarely have I felt more charmed than on Ninth Street, watching a woman stop in the middle of the sidewalk to pull up her hair like it's an emergency—and it is. People do know they're alive. They hardly know what to do with themselves. I almost want to invite her with me but I've passed and yes it'd be crazy like trying to be a poet, trying to be anyone here. *How do you continue to love New York,* my friend who left for California asks me. *It's awful in the summer and winter, and spring and fall last maybe two weeks.* This is true. It's all true, of course, like my preference for difficult men which I had until recently because at last, for one summer the only difficulty I'm willing to imagine is walking through this first humid day with my hands full, not at all peaceful but entirely possible and real.

—Alex Dimitrov

A deep chord is struck between them. Her husband comes home and finds his wife lying naked on the bed under pounding hairy buttocks. He quietly backs out. He is confused. Life, he has always believed, is a comedy, but this isn't very funny. He packs a bag, joins the Foreign Legion, goes off to a distant war. There are flashes of his far-away devil-may-care heroics, while in the bedroom the thug is telling the housewife that, yes, he's had to kill a

few people, but don't hold it against him, it's not who he really is. Back at the house next door, the boy has tried to run away, and the other thug, the cop killer, has shot him. Not fatally. The boss has a soft spot for rebellious kids. He removes the bullet and, as he hasn't seen his kid brother for a while, takes the boy into his gang in his brother's place. He's grown tired of waiting for the sugar, as well as the money, so he decides to leave the remaining thug

with the family and go hold up a church instead, it being the day for it, taking his newest gang member along. The boy asks if he can shoot somebody, and the leader says sure he can. "There are more fucking churches than people in this state," he tells the kid, handing him a gun. "It's the least these creeps deserve." Will the cop killer back at the house rape the boy's sister and knock off the rest of the family? Probably. Can't keep an eye on everything. At the church, the lead gangster finds his kid brother in the congregation, holding hands with some broad. They're praying together. What the hell? The brothers draw their revolvers on each other, baring their teeth, but finally family is family. "This is who I really am," the kid brother croons, as they lower their weapons. The leader grunts and grinds out his own sinister version of the same song, their discordant duet joined remotely by the woman's ex-husband in the Foreign Legion, also now a seasoned killer and a fair-to-middling baritone. The congregation stands and hums along, swaying in rhythm. *This is . . . who . . . I really . . . am. . .* Meanwhile, the boy shoots the preacher, but it's not as much fun as he thought it would be, so he gives the gun back to the boss, and asks if they can go get an ice-cream cone instead. "Chocolate-raspberry crunch," he says when asked. "With sprinkles."

THE LONE RANGER

On a rise within view of the isolated mining town of Striker, where the Cavendish gang is holed up, the masked man known and feared throughout the Territory as the Lone Ranger, the only survivor of the infamous Cavendish ambush, is questioning, in a monologue to his savage sidekick, the miserable lives the two of them have been leading. Virtuous, sure, heroic, taming the lawless West and all that, but the filth of it, Tonto, the poverty, the endless killings. He longs, he says, scratching his scraggly, infested beard, for the gentler pleasures of civilization. Hot baths, for example. "We're growing old, Tonto, and we stink." Tonto says he doesn't give a dung beetle's fart for the white man's civilization, which has never done him any favors, but he is

not satisfied, either. He tells the Ranger the story of the time Coyote got bored with life and crawled into his own asshole and all the world went dark, but the Ranger says he is tired of stories with happy endings, and he peels off his mask (an experience not unlike pulling your pants down in church, he remarks with an embarrassed wince as it rips away), exchanges his white hat for a black one, and borrows Tonto's bandy-legged old paint, Scout, to hobble down into the mining town and raise a little hell, announcing himself, guns blazing, as a wild-ass Cavendish cousin. When the Ranger asks a terrified citizen about Butch Cavendish, he is sent to the church, where he finds his brother's killer in the pulpit, delivering a sermon on Jesus as a man of peace and understanding. It seems that Butch and the rest of the pack have got religion; their cousin will have to raise hell on his own. Butch asks him why he's wearing a white mask. "It's not a mask," the Ranger says. "It's a disease I caught from a woman of pleasure who was exciting herself on my nose." "A woman of pleasure? Cavendishes don't never call them that, cuz," Butch says, squinting suspiciously. "I know, but Cavendishes don't get religion and preach in churches, either. Come out on the street with me for a little whoopee, Butch, and we'll call them by the Cavendish way, and use



them like that, too." Butch gazes sad-eyed upon him as upon a dying cowboy. The members of his gang, hands pressed together in prayer, rock softly from side to side behind him, chorally humming a melancholic church tune. "God bless you, my son," Butch says with a sickeningly beatific smile, clasping his Bible to his breast, "and may He wash away your sins with the blood of the Lamb, like He done mine." And he turns his back. Wearing his Caven-

dish hat, the Ranger could put a hole through that damn back, but under the hat he's still a Ranger and his Ranger creed won't let him. So, feeling somehow cheated, he goes outside and robs the bank, shoots out the grain-store windows, sets all the horses loose, kicks over the water troughs, and torches the courthouse, and, while he's at it, takes on a houseful of painted women and treats them in nasty ways. It feels good after being bottled up all these years. In fact, he hates to give up the disguise, but justice must be done, so he pockets a couple of bars of whorehouse soap and pushes old Scout back up the hillside to the encampment, where Tonto is waiting for him in his usual peyote haze. While lathering himself up in the shallow brook that trickles past, the Ranger tells Tonto about Butch's conversion and new career. "He's a man of the cloth now," he says, "of the sanctimonious sort. But he killed my brother and all my Texas Ranger pals; not even Jesus can wash that away. He's still the black-hat guy, and he must pay for the meanness of his ways. Anyhow, that's what I think, Tonto." "Thought, kemo sabe, is a dark cloud out of which the rain of words falls." "You ought to lay off that cactus pudding, Tonto. It's melting your brain." The Ranger shaves, cleans his fingernails, gets back into his white duds and black mask, whistles for Silver, and returns to the mining town to avenge the crimes committed by himself as a Cavendish and to round up Butch and his villainous gang. Before hiyo-ing his way back up into the hills, the Ranger addresses the citizens of Striker on the subjects of public service, water rights, immigration, the godliness of manly adventure, and the innateness of good and evil. "The Cavendishes are to be pitied," he says, looking down upon them, bound and noosed, "for they could not escape their inborn fate." The people acknowledge his wisdom with rousing cheers and throw their hats into the air. The Lone Ranger, like Jesus, is a man of peace and understanding, sworn only to wound, never to kill, so he lets the townsfolk hang them. ♦

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Robert Coover on the appeal of movies and the value of unhappy endings.

THE CRITICS



A CRITIC AT LARGE

THE HITLER VORTEX

How American racism influenced Nazi thought.

BY ALEX ROSS

History teaches, but has no pupils,” the Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci wrote. That line comes to mind when I browse in the history section of a bookstore. An adage in publishing is that you can never go wrong with books about Lincoln, Hitler, and dogs; an alternative version names golfing, Nazis, and cats. In Germany, it’s said that the only surefire magazine covers are ones that feature Hitler or sex. Whatever the formula, Hitler and Nazism prop up the publishing business: hundreds of titles appear each year, and the total number runs well into the tens of thousands. On store shelves, they stare out at you by the dozens, their spines steeped in the black-white-and-red of the Nazi flag, their titles barking in Gothic type, their covers studded with swastikas. The back catalogue includes “I Was Hitler’s Pilot,” “I Was Hitler’s Chauffeur,” “I Was Hitler’s Doctor,” “Hitler, My Neighbor,” “Hitler Was My Friend,” “He Was My Chief,” and “Hitler Is No Fool.” Books have been written about Hitler’s youth, his years in Vienna and Munich, his service in the First World War, his assumption of power, his library, his taste in art, his love of film, his relations with women, and his predilections in interior design (“Hitler at Home”).

Why do these books pile up in such unreadable numbers? This may seem a perverse question. The Holocaust is the greatest crime in history, one that people remain desperate to understand. Germany’s plunge from the heights of civilization to the depths of barbarism is an everlasting shock. Still, these swastika covers trade all too frankly on

Hitler’s undeniable flair for graphic design. (The Nazi flag was apparently his creation—finalized after “innumerable attempts,” according to “Mein Kampf.”) Susan Sontag, in her 1975 essay “Fascinating Fascism,” declared that the appeal of Nazi iconography had become erotic, not only in S & M circles but also in the wider culture. It was, Sontag wrote, a “response to an oppressive freedom of choice in sex (and, possibly, in other matters), to an unbearable degree of individuality.” Neo-Nazi movements have almost certainly fed on the perpetuation of Hitler’s negative mystique.

Americans have an especially insatiable appetite for Nazi-themed books, films, television shows, documentaries, video games, and comic books. Stories of the Second World War console us with memories of the days before Vietnam, Cambodia, and Iraq, when the United States was the world’s good-hearted superpower, riding to the rescue of a Europe paralyzed by totalitarianism and appeasement. Yet an eerie continuity became visible in the post-war years, as German scientists were imported to America and began working for their former enemies; the resulting technologies of mass destruction exceeded Hitler’s darkest imaginings. The Nazis idolized many aspects of American society: the cult of sport, Hollywood production values, the mythology of the frontier. From boyhood on, Hitler devoured the Westerns of the popular German novelist Karl May. In 1928, Hitler remarked, approvingly, that white settlers in America had “gunned down the millions of redskins to a few hun-

dred thousand.” When he spoke of *Lebensraum*, the German drive for “living space” in Eastern Europe, he often had America in mind.

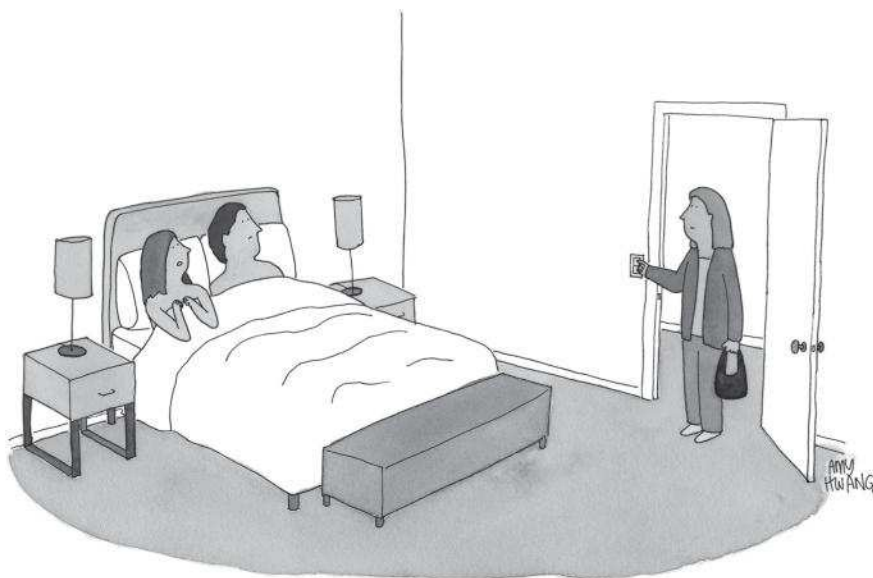
Among recent books on Nazism, the one that may prove most disquieting for American readers is James Q. Whitman’s “Hitler’s American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law” (Princeton). On the cover, the inevitable swastika is flanked by two red stars. Whitman methodically explores how the Nazis took inspiration from American racism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He notes that, in “Mein Kampf,” Hitler praises America as the one state that has made progress toward a primarily racial conception of citizenship, by “excluding certain races from naturalization.” Whitman writes that the discussion of such influences is almost taboo, because the crimes of the Third Reich are commonly defined as “the *nefandum*, the unspeakable descent into what we often call ‘radical evil.’” But the kind of genocidal hatred that erupted in Germany had been seen before and has been seen since. Only by stripping away its national regalia and comprehending its essential human form do we have any hope of vanquishing it.

The vast literature on Hitler and Nazism keeps circling around a few enduring questions. The first is biographical: How did an Austrian watercolor painter turned military orderly emerge as a far-right German rabble-rouser after the First World War? The second is sociopolitical: How did a civilized society come to embrace

ABOVE: LEWIS SCOTT



Hitler, circa 1923. Five years later, he noted, approvingly, that white Americans had “gunned down . . . millions of redskins.”



"It's not what it looks like. The sex is horrible, and we're miserable."

Hitler's extreme ideas? The third has to do with the intersection of man and regime: To what extent was Hitler in control of the apparatus of the Third Reich? All these questions point to the central enigma of the Holocaust, which has variously been interpreted as a premeditated action and as a barbaric improvisation. In our current age of unapologetic racism and resurgent authoritarianism, the mechanics of Hitler's rise are a particularly pressing matter. For dismantlers of democracy, there is no better exemplar.

Since 1945, the historiography of Nazism has undergone several broad transformations, reflecting political pressures both within Germany and abroad. In the early Cold War period, the emergence of West Germany as a bulwark against the Soviet menace tended to discourage a closer interrogation of German cultural values. The first big post-war biography of Hitler, by the British historian Alan Bullock, published in 1952, depicted him as a charlatan, a manipulator, an "opportunist entirely without principle." German thinkers often skirted the issue of Hitler, preferring systemic explanations. Hannah Arendt's "The Origins of Totalitarianism" suggested that dictatorial energies draw on the loneliness of the modern subject.

In the sixties and seventies, as Cold War Realpolitik receded and the full

horror of the Holocaust sank in, many historians adopted what is known as the *Sonderweg* thesis—the idea that Germany had followed a "special path" in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, different from that of other Western nations. In this reading, the Germany of the Wilhelmine period had failed to develop along healthy liberal-democratic lines; the inability to modernize politically prepared the ground for Nazism. In Germany, left-oriented scholars like Hans Mommsen used this concept to call for a greater sense of collective responsibility; to focus on Hitler was an evasion, the argument went, implying that Nazism was something that *he* did to *us*. Mommsen outlined a "cumulative radicalization" of the Nazi state in which Hitler functioned as a "weak dictator," ceding policy-making to competing bureaucratic agencies. Abroad, the *Sonderweg* theory took on a punitive edge, indicting all of German history and culture. William Manchester's 1968 book, "The Arms of Krupp," ends with a lurid image of "the first grim Aryan savage crouched in his garment of coarse skins, his crude javelin poised, tense and alert, cloaked by night and fog, ready; waiting; and waiting."

The *Sonderweg* argument was attacked on multiple fronts. In what became known as the *Historikerstreit* ("Historians' Dispute"), right-wing scholars

in Germany proposed that the nation end its ritual self-flagellation: they re-framed Nazism as a reaction to Bolshevism and recast the Holocaust as one genocide among many. Joachim Fest, who had published the first big German-language biography of Hitler, also stood apart from the *Sonderweg* school. By portraying the Führer as an all-dominating, quasi-demonic figure, Fest effectively placed less blame on the Weimar Republic conservatives who put Hitler in office. More dubious readings presented Hitlerism as an experiment that modernized Germany and then went awry. Such ideas have lost ground in Germany, at least for now: in mainstream discourse there, it is axiomatic to accept responsibility for the Nazi terror.

Outside Germany, many critiques of the *Sonderweg* thesis came from the left. The British scholars Geoff Eley and David Blackbourn, in their 1984 book "The Peculiarities of German History," questioned the "tyranny of hindsight"—the lordly perspective that reduces a complex, contingent sequence of events to an irreversible progression. In the allegedly backward Kaiserreich, Eley and Blackbourn saw various liberalizing forces in motion: housing reform, public-health initiatives, an emboldened press. It was a society riddled with anti-Semitism, yet it witnessed no upheaval on the scale of the Dreyfus Affair or the Tiszaeszlár blood-libel affair in Hungary. Eley and Blackbourn also questioned whether elitist, imperialist Britain should be held up as the modern paragon. The *Sonderweg* narrative could become an exculpatory fairy tale for other nations: we may make mistakes, but we will never be as bad as the Germans.

Ian Kershaw's monumental two-volume biography (1998-2000) found a plausible middle ground between "strong" and "weak" images of Hitler in power. With his nocturnal schedule, his dislike of paperwork, and his aversion to dialogue, Hitler was an eccentric executive, to say the least. To make sense of a dictatorship in which the dictator was intermittently absent, Kershaw expounded the concept of "working towards the Führer": when explicit direction from Hitler was lacking, Nazi functionaries guessed at what he wanted, and often further radicalized his poli-

cies. Even as debates about the nature of Hitler's leadership go back and forth, scholars largely agree that his ideology was more or less fixed from the mid-twenties onward. His two abiding obsessions were violent anti-Semitism and *Lebensraum*. As early as 1921, he spoke of confining Jews to concentration camps, and in 1923 he contemplated—and, for the moment, rejected—the idea of killing the entire Jewish population. The Holocaust was the result of a hideous syllogism: if Germany were to expand into the East, where millions of Jews lived, those Jews would have to vanish, because Germans could not coexist with them.

People have been trying to fathom Hitler's psyche for nearly a century. Ron Rosenbaum, in his 1998 book "Explaining Hitler," gives a tour of the more outré theories. It has been suggested, variously, that the key to understanding Hitler is the fact that he had an abusive father; that he was too close to his mother; that he had a Jewish grandfather; that he had encephalitis; that he contracted syphilis from a Jewish prostitute; that he blamed a Jewish doctor for his mother's death; that he was missing a testicle; that he underwent a wayward hypnosis treatment; that he was gay; that he harbored coprophilic fantasies about his niece; that he was addled by drugs; or—a personal favorite—that his anti-Semitism was triggered by briefly attending school with Ludwig Wittgenstein, in Linz. At the root of this speculative mania is what Rosenbaum calls the "lost safe-deposit box" mentality: with sufficient sleuthing, the mystery can be solved in one Sherlockian stroke.

Academic historians, by contrast, often portray Hitler as a cipher, a nobody. Kershaw has called him a "man without qualities." Volker Ullrich, a German author and journalist long associated with the weekly *Die Zeit*, felt the need for a biography that paid more heed to Hitler's private life. The first volume, "Hitler: Ascent 1889–1939," was published by Knopf in 2016, in a fluid translation by Jefferson Chase. Ullrich's Hitler is no tyrant-sorcerer who leads an innocent Germany astray; he is a chameleon, acutely conscious of the image he projects. "The putative void

was part of Hitler's persona, a means of concealing his personal life and presenting himself as a politician who completely identified with his role as leader," Ullrich writes. Hitler could pose as a cultured gentleman at Munich salons, as a pistol-waving thug at the beer hall, and as a bohemian in the company of singers and actors. He had an exceptional memory that allowed him to assume an air of superficial mastery. His certitude faltered, however, in the presence of women: Ullrich depicts Hitler's love life as a series of largely unfulfilled fixations. It goes without saying that he was an extreme narcissist lacking in empathy. Much has been made of his love of dogs, but he was cruel to them.

From adolescence onward, Hitler was a dreamer and a loner. Averse to joining groups, much less leading them, he immersed himself in books, music, and art. His ambition to become a painter was hampered by a limited technique and by a telling want of feeling for human figures. When he moved to Vienna, in 1908, he slipped toward the social margins, residing briefly in a homeless shelter and then in a men's home. In Munich, where he moved in 1913, he eked out a living as an artist and otherwise spent his days in museums and his nights at the opera. He was steeped in Wagner, though he had little apparent grasp of the composer's psychological intricacies and ambiguities. A sharp portrait of the young Hitler can be found in Thomas Mann's



startling essay "Bruder Hitler," the English version of which appeared in *Esquire* in 1939, under the title "That Man Is My Brother." Aligning Hitler's experience with his own, Mann wrote of a "basic arrogance, the basic feeling of being too good for any reasonable, honorable activity—based on what? A vague notion of being reserved for something else, something quite indeterminate, which, if it were named, would

cause people to break out laughing."

The claims of "Mein Kampf" notwithstanding, there is no clear evidence that Hitler harbored strongly anti-Semitic views in his youth or in early adulthood. Indeed, he seems to have had friendly relations with several Jews in Vienna and Munich. This does not mean that he was free of commonplace anti-Jewish prejudice. Certainly, he was a fervent German nationalist. When the First World War commenced, in 1914, he volunteered for the German Army, and acquitted himself well as a soldier. For most of the war, he served as a dispatch runner for his regiment's commanders. The first trace of a swing to the right comes in a letter from 1915, in which Hitler expressed the hope that the war would bring an end to Germany's "inner internationalism."

The historian Thomas Weber, who recounted Hitler's soldier years in the 2010 book "Hitler's First War," has now written "Becoming Hitler: The Making of a Nazi" (Basic), a study of the postwar metamorphosis. Significantly, Hitler remained in the Army after the Armistice; disgruntled nationalist soldiers tended to join paramilitary groups. Because the Social Democratic parties were dominant at the founding of the Weimar Republic, Hitler was representing a leftist government. He even served the short-lived Bavarian Soviet Republic. It is doubtful, though, that he had active sympathies for the left; he probably stayed in the Army because, as Weber writes, it "provided a *raison d'être* for his existence." As late as his thirtieth birthday, in April, 1919, there was no sign of the Führer-to-be.

The unprecedented anarchy of post-war Bavaria helps explain what happened next. Street killings were routine; politicians were assassinated on an almost weekly basis. The left was blamed for the chaos, and anti-Semitism escalated for the same reason: several prominent leaders of the left were Jewish. Then came the Treaty of Versailles, which was signed in June, 1919. Robert Gerwarth, in "The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), emphasizes the whiplash effect that the treaty had on the defeated Central Powers. As Gerwarth writes, German and Austrian politicians believed that

they had “broken with the autocratic traditions of the past, thus fulfilling the key criteria of Wilson’s Fourteen Points for a ‘just peace.’” The harshness of the terms of Versailles belied that idealistic rhetoric.

The day after Germany ratified the treaty, Hitler began attending Army propaganda classes aimed at repressing revolutionary tendencies. These infused him with hard-core anti-capitalist and anti-Semitic ideas. The officer in charge of the program was a tragic figure named Karl Mayr, who later forsook the right wing for the left; he died in Buchenwald, in 1945. Mayr described Hitler as a “tired stray dog looking for a master.” Having noticed Hitler’s gift for public speaking, Mayr installed him as a lecturer and sent him out to observe political activities in Munich. In September, 1919, Hitler came across the German Workers’ Party, a tiny fringe faction. He spoke up at one of its meetings and joined its ranks. Within a few months, he had become the leading orator of the group, which was renamed the National Socialist German Workers’ Party.

If Hitler’s radicalization occurred as rapidly as this—and not all historians agree that it did—the progression bears an unsettling resemblance to stories that we now read routinely in the news, of harmless-seeming, cat-loving suburbanites who watch white-nationalist videos on YouTube and then join a neo-Nazi group on Facebook. But Hitler’s embrace of belligerent nationalism and murderous anti-Semitism is not in itself historically significant; what mattered was his gift for injecting that rhetoric into mainstream discourse. Peter Longerich’s “Hitler: Biographie,” a thirteen-hundred-page tome that appeared in Germany in 2015, gives a potent picture of Hitler’s skills as a speaker, organizer, and propagandist. Even those who found his words repulsive were mesmerized by him. He would begin quietly, almost haltingly, testing out his audience and creating suspense. He amused the crowd with sardonic asides and actorly impersonations. The musical structure was one of crescendo toward triumphant rage. Longerich writes, “It was this eccentric style, almost pitiable, unhinged, obviously not well trained, at the same time ecstatically

over-the-top, that evidently conveyed to his audience the idea of uniqueness and authenticity.”

Above all, Hitler knew how to project himself through the mass media, honing his messages so that they would penetrate the white noise of politics. He fostered the production of catchy graphics, posters, and slogans; in time, he mastered radio and film. Meanwhile, squads of Brown Shirts brutalized and murdered opponents, heightening the very disorder that Hitler had proposed to cure. His most adroit feat came after the failed Beer Hall Putsch, in 1923, which should have ended his political career. At the trial that followed, Hitler polished his personal narrative, that of a simple soldier who had heard the call of destiny. In prison, he wrote the first part of “Mein Kampf,” in which he completed the construction of his world view.

To many liberal-minded Germans of the twenties, Hitler was a scary but ludicrous figure who did not seem to represent a serious threat. The Weimar Republic stabilized somewhat in the middle of the decade, and the Nazi share of the vote languished in the low single-digit figures. The economic misery of the late twenties and early thirties provided another opportunity, which Hitler seized. Benjamin Carter Hett deftly summarizes this dismal period in “The Death of Democracy: Hitler’s Rise to Power and the Downfall of the Weimar Republic” (Henry Holt). Conservatives made the gargantuan mistake of seeing Hitler as a useful tool for rousing the populace. They also undermined parliamentary democracy, flouted regional governments, and otherwise set the stage for the Nazi state. The left, meanwhile, was divided against itself. At Stalin’s urging, many Communists viewed the Social Democrats, not the Nazis, as the real enemy—the “social fascists.” The media got caught up in pop-culture distractions; traditional liberal newspapers were losing circulation. Valiant journalists like Konrad Heiden tried to correct the barrage of Nazi propaganda but found the effort futile, because, as Heiden wrote, “the refutation would be heard, perhaps believed, and definitely forgotten again.”

Hett refrains from poking the reader with too many obvious contemporary

parallels, but he knew what he was doing when he left the word “German” out of his title. On the book’s final page, he lays his cards on the table: “Thinking about the end of Weimar democracy in this way—as the result of a large protest movement colliding with complex patterns of elite self-interest, in a culture increasingly prone to aggressive mythmaking and irrationality—strips away the exotic and foreign look of swastika banners and goose-stepping Stormtroopers. Suddenly, the whole thing looks close and familiar.” Yes, it does.

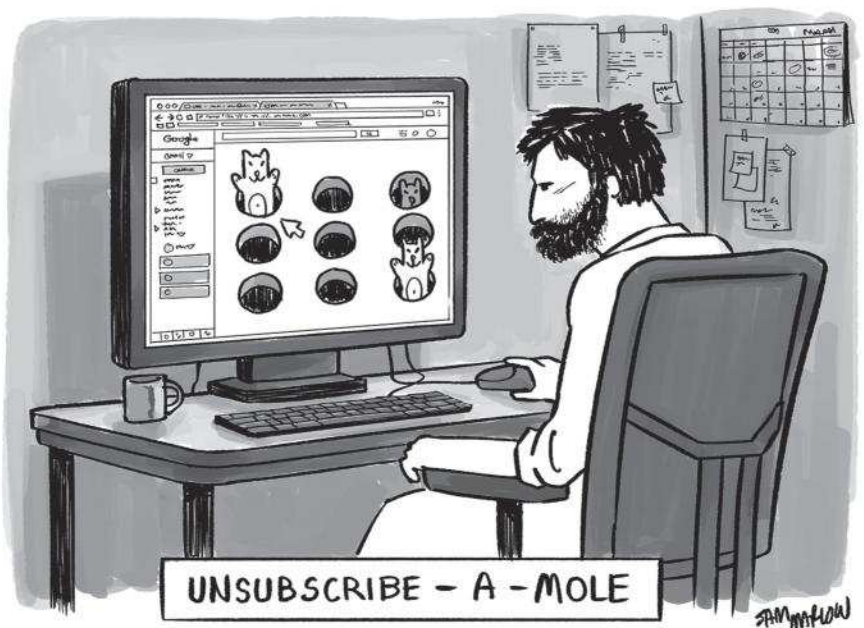
What set Hitler apart from most authoritarian figures in history was his conception of himself as an artist-genius who used politics as his *métier*. It is a mistake to call him a failed artist; for him, politics and war were a continuation of art by other means. This is the focus of Wolfram Pyta’s “Hitler: Der Künstler als Politiker und Feldherr” (“The Artist as Politician and Commander”), one of the most striking recent additions to the literature. Although the aestheticizing of politics is hardly a new topic—Walter Benjamin discussed it in the nineteen-thirties, as did Mann—Pyta pursues the theme at magisterial length, showing how Hitler debased the Romantic cult of genius to incarnate himself as a transcendent leader hovering above the fray. Goebbels’s propaganda harped on this motif; his diaries imply that he believed it. “Adolf Hitler, I love you because you are both great and simple,” he wrote.

The true artist does not compromise. Defying skeptics and mockers, he imagines the impossible. Such is the tenor of Hitler’s infamous “prophecy” of the destruction of the European Jews, in 1939: “I have often been a prophet, and have generally been laughed at. . . . I believe that the formerly resounding laughter of Jewry in Germany has now choked up in its throat. Today, I want to be a prophet again—if the international Jewish financiers inside and outside Europe should succeed in plunging the nations once more into a world war, then the result will not be the Bolshevization of the earth, and thus the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe.” Scholars have long debated when the decision to carry out the Final Solution was made. Most now believe that the Holocaust

was an escalating series of actions, driven by pressure both from above and from below. Yet no order was really necessary. Hitler's "prophecy" was itself an oblique command. In the summer of 1941, as hundreds of thousands of Jews and Slavs were being killed during the invasion of the Soviet Union, Goebbels recalled Hitler remarking that the prophecy was being fulfilled in an "almost uncanny" fashion. This is the language of a connoisseur admiring a masterpiece. Such intellectual atrocities led Theodor W. Adorno to declare that, after Auschwitz, to write poetry is barbaric.

Hitler and Goebbels were the first relativizers of the Holocaust, the first purveyors of false equivalence. "Concentration camps were not invented in Germany," Hitler said in 1941. "It is the English who are their inventors, using this institution to gradually break the backs of other nations." The British had operated camps in South Africa, the Nazis pointed out. Party propagandists similarly highlighted the sufferings of Native Americans and Stalin's slaughter in the Soviet Union. In 1943, Goebbels triumphantly broadcast news of the Katyn Forest massacre, in the course of which the Soviet secret police killed more than twenty thousand Poles. (Goebbels wanted to show footage of the mass graves, but generals overruled him.) Nazi sympathizers carry on this project today, alternately denying the Holocaust and explaining it away.

The magnitude of the abomination almost forbids that it be mentioned in the same breath as any other horror. Yet the Holocaust has unavoidable international dimensions—lines of influence, circles of complicity, moments of congruence. Hitler's "scientific anti-Semitism," as he called it, echoed the French racial theorist Arthur de Gobineau and anti-Semitic intellectuals who normalized venomous language during the Dreyfus Affair. The British Empire was Hitler's ideal image of a master race in dominant repose. "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion," a Russian forgery from around 1900, fuelled the Nazis' paranoia. The Armenian genocide of 1915-16 encouraged the belief that the world community would care little about the fate of the Jews.



Just before the outbreak of the Second World War, Hitler spoke of the planned mass murder of Poles and asked, "Who, after all, is today speaking about the destruction of the Armenians?" The Nazis found collaborators in almost every country that they invaded. In one Lithuanian town, a crowd cheered while a local man clubbed dozens of Jewish people to death. He then stood atop the corpses and played the Lithuanian anthem on an accordion. German soldiers looked on, taking photographs.

The mass killings by Stalin and Hitler existed in an almost symbiotic relationship, the one giving license to the other, in remorseless cycles of revenge. Large-scale deportations of Jews from the countries of the Third Reich followed upon Stalin's deportation of the Volga Germans. Reinhard Heydrich, one of the chief planners of the Holocaust, thought that, once the Soviet Union had been defeated, the Jews of Europe could be left to die in the Gulag. The most dangerous claim made by right-wing historians during the *Historikerstreit* was that Nazi terror was a response to Bolshevik terror, and was therefore to some degree excusable. One can, however, keep the entire monstrous landscape in view without minimizing the culpability of perpetrators on either side. This was the achievement of Timothy Snyder's profoundly disturbing 2010 book, "Bloodlands,"

which seems to fix cameras in spots across Eastern Europe, recording wave upon wave of slaughter.

As for Hitler and America, the issue goes beyond such obvious suspects as Henry Ford and Charles Lindbergh. Whitman's "Hitler's American Model," with its comparative analysis of American and Nazi race law, joins such previous studies as Carroll Kakel's "The American West and the Nazi East," a side-by-side discussion of Manifest Destiny and *Lebensraum*; and Stefan Kühl's "The Nazi Connection," which describes the impact of the American eugenics movement on Nazi thinking. This literature is provocative in tone and, at times, tendentious, but it engages in a necessary act of self-examination, of a kind that modern Germany has exemplified.

The Nazis were not wrong to cite American precedents. Enslavement of African-Americans was written into the U.S. Constitution. Thomas Jefferson spoke of the need to "eliminate" or "extirpate" Native Americans. In 1856, an Oregonian settler wrote, "Extermination, however unchristianlike it may appear, seems to be the only resort left for the protection of life and property." General Philip Sheridan spoke of "annihilation, obliteration, and complete destruction." To be sure, others promoted more peaceful—albeit still repressive—policies. The historian

Edward B. Westermann, in “Hitler’s Ostkrieg and the Indian Wars” (Oklahoma), concludes that, because federal policy never officially mandated the “physical annihilation of the Native populations on racial grounds or characteristics,” this was not a genocide on the order of the Shoah. The fact remains that between 1500 and 1900 the Native population of U.S. territories dropped from many millions to around two hundred thousand.

America’s knack for maintaining an air of robust innocence in the wake of mass death struck Hitler as an example to be emulated. He made frequent mention of the American West in the early months of the Soviet invasion. The Volga would be “our Mississippi,” he said. “Europe—and not America—will be the land of unlimited possibilities.” Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine would be populated by pioneer farmer-soldier families. Autobahns would cut through fields of grain. The present occupants of those lands—tens of millions of them—would be starved to death. At the same time, and with no sense of contradiction, the Nazis parroted a long-standing German romanticization of Native Americans. One of Goebbels’s less propitious schemes was to confer honorary Aryan status on Native American tribes, in the hope that they would rise up against their oppressors.

Jim Crow laws in the American South served as a precedent in a stricter legal sense. Scholars have long been aware that Hitler’s regime expressed admiration for American race law, but they have tended to see this as a public-relations strategy—an “everybody does it” justification for Nazi policies. Whitman, however, points out that if these comparisons had been intended solely for a foreign audience they would not have been buried in hefty tomes in Fraktur type. “Race Law in the United States,” a 1936 study by the German lawyer Heinrich Krieger, attempts to sort out inconsistencies in the legal status of nonwhite Americans. Krieger concludes that the entire apparatus is hopelessly opaque, concealing racist aims behind contorted justifications. Why not simply say what one means? This was a major difference between American and German racism.

American eugenicists made no secret of their racist objectives, and their views were prevalent enough that F. Scott Fitzgerald featured them in “The Great Gatsby.” (The cloddish Tom Buchanan, having evidently read Lothrop Stoddard’s 1920 tract “The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy,” says, “The idea is if we don’t look out the white race will be—will be utterly submerged.”) California’s sterilization program directly inspired the Nazi sterilization law of 1934. There are also sinister, if mostly coincidental, similarities between American and German technologies of death. In 1924, the first execution by gas chamber took place, in Nevada. In a history of the American gas chamber, Scott Christianson states that the fumigating agent Zyklon-B, which was licensed to American Cyanamid by the German company I. G. Farben, was considered as a lethal agent but found to be impractical. Zyklon-B was, however, used to disinfect immigrants as they crossed the border at El Paso—a practice that did not go unnoticed by Gerhard Peters, the chemist who supplied a modified version of Zyklon-B to Auschwitz. Later, American gas chambers were outfitted with a chute down which poison pellets were dropped. Earl Liston, the inventor of the device, explained, “Pulling a lever to kill a man is hard work. Pouring acid down a tube is easier on the nerves, more like watering flowers.” Much the same method was introduced at Auschwitz, to relieve stress on S.S. guards.

When Hitler praised American restrictions on naturalization, he had in mind the Immigration Act of 1924, which imposed national quotas and barred most Asian people altogether. For Nazi observers, this was evidence that America was evolving in the right direction, despite its specious rhetoric about equality. The Immigration Act, too, played a facilitating role in the Holocaust, because the quotas prevented thousands of Jews, including Anne Frank and her family, from reaching America. In 1938, President Roosevelt called for an international conference on the plight of European refugees; this was held in Évian-les-Bains, France, but no substantive change resulted. The German Foreign Office, in a sardonic reply, found it “astounding”

that other countries would decry Germany’s treatment of Jews and then decline to admit them.

Hundreds of thousands of Americans died fighting Nazi Germany. Still, bigotry toward Jews persisted, even toward Holocaust survivors. General George Patton criticized do-gooders who “believe that the Displaced person is a human being, which he is not, and this applies particularly to the Jews who are lower than animals.” Leading Nazi scientists had it better. Brian Crim’s “Our Germans: Project Paperclip and the National Security State” (Johns Hopkins) reviews the shady history of Wernher von Braun and his colleagues from the V-2 program. When Braun was captured, in 1945, he realized that the Soviets would become the next archenemy of the American military-industrial complex, and cannily promoted the idea of a high-tech weapons program to ward off the Bolshevik menace. He was able to reconstitute most of his operation Stateside, minus the slave labor. Records were airbrushed; de-Nazification procedures were bypassed (they were considered “demoralizing”); immigration was expedited. J. Edgar Hoover became concerned that Jewish obstructionists in the State Department were asking too many questions about the scientists’ backgrounds. Senator Styles Bridges proposed that the State Department needed a “first-class cyanide fumigating job.”

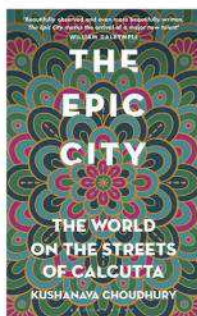
These chilling points of contact are little more than footnotes to the history of Nazism. But they tell us rather more about modern America. Like a colored dye coursing through the bloodstream, they expose vulnerabilities in the national consciousness. The spread of white-supremacist propaganda on the Internet is the latest chapter. As Zeynep Tufekci recently observed, in the *Times*, YouTube is a superb vehicle for the circulation of such content, its algorithms guiding users toward ever more inflammatory material. She writes, “Given its billion or so users, YouTube may be one of the most powerful radicalizing instruments of the 21st century.” When I did a search for “Hitler” on YouTube the other day, I was first shown a video labelled “Best Hitler Documentary in COLOR!”—the

British production “Hitler in Color.” A pro-Hitler remark was featured atop the comments, and soon, thanks to Autoplay, I was viewing contributions from such users as CelticAngloPress and SoldatdesReiches.

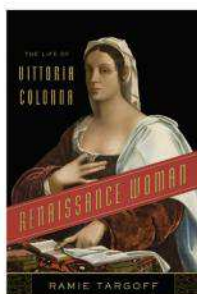
In 1990, *Vanity Fair* reported that Donald Trump once kept a book of Hitler’s speeches by his bed. When Trump was asked about it, he said, “If I had these speeches, and I am not saying that I do, I would never read them.” Since Trump entered politics, he has repeatedly been compared to Hitler, not least by neo-Nazis. Although some resemblances can be found—at times, Trump appears to be emulating Hitler’s strategy of cultivating rivalries among those under him, and his rallies are cathartic rituals of racism, xenophobia, and self-regard—the differences are obvious and stark. For one thing, Hitler had more discipline. What is worth pondering is how a demagogue of Hitler’s malign skill might more effectively exploit flaws in American democracy. He would certainly have at his disposal craven right-wing politicians who are worthy heirs to Hindenburg, Brüning, Papen, and Schleicher. He would also have millions of citizens who acquiesce in inconceivably potent networks of corporate surveillance and control.

The artist-politician of the future will not bask in the antique aura of Wagner and Nietzsche. He is more likely to take inspiration from the newly minted myths of popular culture. The archetype of the ordinary kid who discovers that he has extraordinary powers is a familiar one from comic books and superhero movies, which play on the adolescent feeling that something is profoundly wrong with the world and that a magic weapon might banish the spell. With one stroke, the inconspicuous outsider assumes a position of supremacy, on a battlefield of pure good against pure evil. For most people, such stories remain fantasy, a means of embellishing everyday life. One day, though, a ruthless dreamer, a loner who has a “vague notion of being reserved for something else,” may attempt to turn metaphor into reality. He might be out there now, cloaked by the blue light of a computer screen, ready, waiting. ♦

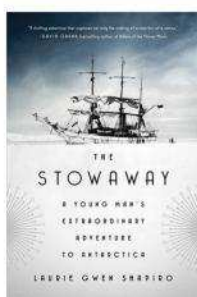
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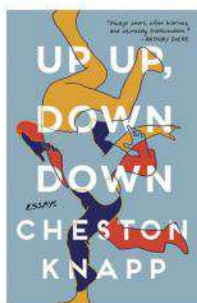
The Epic City, by Kushanava Choudhury (Bloomsbury). This searching memoir charts the American-born author’s relationship with Calcutta, the city from which his parents emigrated and to which he periodically returns—including a stint as a journalist—eventually choosing to settle there. Choudhury sees the city, once known as the cultural center of India, as “an impossible place” characterized by political conflict, artistic achievement, and the “unmistakable bouquet” of urine. Flitting between history and travelogue, the book is most memorable for its portraits of people: family elders in New Jersey who “derailed each other’s sentences in locomotive Bengali”; American students for whom “Calcutta would only be the city of poverty and Teresa, suffering and its redeemer.”



Renaissance Woman, by Ramie Targoff (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). In this richly realized biography, Targoff explores the life of the sixteenth-century Italian noblewoman, poet, and patron Vittoria Colonna. Renowned for her “spiritual power,” Colonna dreamed of becoming a nun, but the Pope so valued her as a secular ally that he wouldn’t allow it. She turned to writing, becoming the first woman to publish a book of poems in Italy. Had she not been so talented and so virtuous, the challenge she posed might well have been too great for her male contemporaries to bear. As it was, she befriended many of the pivotal figures of the day, most famously Michelangelo. She is often described dismissively as his “muse,” but Targoff shows that Colonna was a true intellectual partner, engaging him in vigorous discussions of art.



The Stowaway, by Laurie Gwen Shapiro (Simon & Schuster). In 1928, Billy Gawronski—the teen-age son of Polish immigrants on the Lower East Side—dived into the Hudson River and stole aboard a ship bound for Antarctica. It was commanded by the famed aviator Richard Byrd, who was to conduct the first flight over the South Pole. Gawronski was hailed as a minor hero upon his return, celebrated by the press as the “boy stowaway.” This history draws on Gawronski’s letters home and on newspaper reports to reconstruct the voyage in novelistic style. Shapiro also evokes the era’s fixation on adventure and celebrity, writing, “For many Americans, Billy’s narrative became the first account they heard from a true member of the expedition—not a designated reporter.”



Up Up, Down Down, by Cheston Knapp (Scribner). The charming essays collected here, borne along by an easy Southern palaver, range widely in subject: local professional wrestling; a U.F.O. enthusiasts’ society in Oregon; the story of a neighbor, bipolar and alcoholic, who was murdered by a homeless person he took in. Personal elements are threaded throughout, and Knapp, now married, looks back with bemusement and chagrin on a parade of his former selves—a lacrosse player partial to alternative metal bands; a reluctant frat boy; a cultish devotee of David Foster Wallace—and wonders what they add up to.

DANCING IN YOUR HEAD

An electronic-music producer has a spiritual awakening.

BY KELEFA SANNEH

A decade ago, in the spring of 2008, Coldplay released an album with a grand title and a grander purpose. The title was “Viva la Vida or Death and All His Friends.” The purpose was to transform Coldplay, which was just about the most popular band in the world—and just about the most reviled, too. To facilitate this transformation, the members had recruited Brian Eno, the legendary producer and electronic composer. Chris Martin, the singer, told MTV that he was intent on “breaking down” the band’s musical identity and “trying to build something different, and hopefully better.” But if the album was a revolution it was a mild one. “Viva la Vida” began with a collection of chiming, flickering sounds, unobtrusive at first but slowly growing louder, as a hummable tune revealed itself. A critic for the *Daily Telegraph* called this introduction “spine-tinglingly beautiful.” Others, less impressed, suggested that it evoked the similarly atmospheric opening of another album produced by Eno: “The Joshua Tree,” by U2.

In fact, the introduction was the work not of Eno but of his collaborator Jon Hopkins, a previously obscure musician who had allowed Coldplay to use an unreleased track of his. In return, the band brought Hopkins on tour as the opening act, which gave him a chance to play his electronic compositions to arena crowds. Hopkins signed to the discerning indie label Domino, and in 2009 he released “Insides,” which included a nine-minute version of the track that Coldplay borrowed. Instead of build-

ing into a cheerful rock song, it melted into a series of slow arpeggios and eventually faded away. The album was warm and meticulous, full of graceful crackles and chimes, and it inspired a chorus of acclaim that has been building ever since.

Hopkins is now thirty-eight, and one of the most celebrated electronic mu-

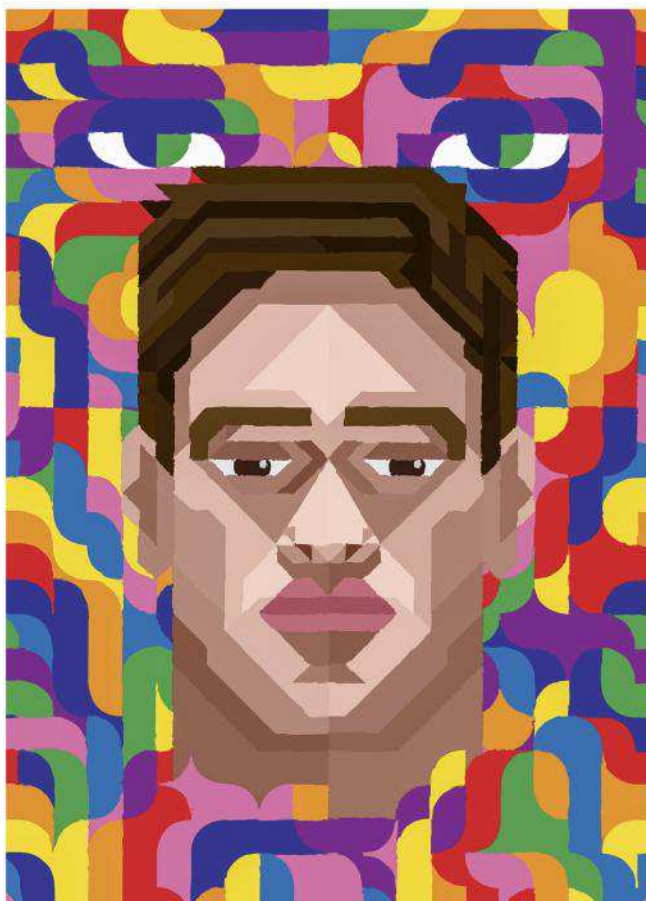
his own albums, which appear every five years or so and then reappear on innumerable best-of lists. Next month, he will release “Singularity,” ending a quiet but dramatic period in his life, during which he recovered from the rigors of touring by subjecting his body to other kinds of stress: desert treks, controlled breathing, freezing baths. Apparently, these exertions had an effect, because the new album is both the gentlest and the most epic of Hopkins’s career.

“Singularity” is an hour-long ode to spiritual transcendence that also resembles pleasant background noise—at least, it does at first. The album includes a handful of wispy, beatless tracks that might be considered ambient music, a genre that Eno invented. In the liner

notes to “Ambient 1: Music for Airports,” from 1978, Eno wrote that ambient music “must be as ignorable as it is interesting.” Hopkins has been pleased to learn that his albums have generally failed to meet this exacting standard. “Someone will say, I went to do some cooking and put it on, and ended up sitting down and listening to the whole thing,” he says. “Obviously, that’s what you want—you’ve captured them.”

Just as older generations of musicians were seduced by the electric guitar, Hopkins, as a boy, was seduced by the Roland TB-303, the synthesizer whose squelchy, serrated sound defined the genre known as acid house. He grew up outside London, studying the piano and, at night, studying the pirate radio stations that played mysterious records by unknown producers. He remembers being captivated by “Acperience 1,”

an influential 1992 track that layered surging, menacing Roland bass lines to create nine minutes of dance-floor disorientation. (It was, Hopkins eventually learned, the work of a German duo called Hardfloor.) But he was drawn, too, to the sturdy melodies of pop. At eighteen, he was hired as the touring keyboard player for the venturesome



Jon Hopkins's new album is both his gentlest and his most epic.

sicians of his generation. He has a paradoxical ability to make obsessively engineered tracks that sound friendly and generous; his sensibility is openhearted and sometimes sentimental—an approach that can make him seem like an outlier in the world of electronic music. Hopkins is known for his collaborations and soundtracks and, above all,

pop singer Imogen Heap, a job that led to work as a session musician. On the side, Hopkins made a pair of pretty but rather drowsy solo albums, which were widely ignored, with one important exception: Eno heard the second one, “Contact Note,” and invited Hopkins to his studio. They worked together on that Coldplay album and, along with another musician, Leo Abrahams, on the score for “The Lovely Bones,” as well as on a collaborative album that appeared in 2010, which took the form of fifteen transient clouds of sound.

In the years since the twinned revolutions of house and techno, in the nineteen-eighties, “electronic music” has often been synonymous with “dance music.” But Hopkins had his formative encounters with tracks like “Acperience 1” in his bedroom, sitting around with friends, entranced. In his early work, rhythm sometimes seems to be an afterthought: his first two albums often relied on slouchy, hip-hop-inspired beats that can sound generic. “Insides,” his Domino debut, marked a new beginning: Hopkins built stiffer, quicker beats, to draw out the unease that lurked within his seemingly serene compositions. “Immunity,” from 2013, was even more propulsive. It was a reflection of Hopkins’s growing friendship with a cohort of like-minded electronic producers, including Kieran Hebden (who records as Four Tet) and Nathan Fake. It also reflected Hopkins’s life as an increasingly popular producer and occasional d.j., which gave him a new appreciation for the fine art of moving crowds. His electronic music had become dance music, too.

Then, having finally found a home in night clubs, Hopkins defected. He moved to Los Angeles, learned to meditate, and made spiritual pilgrimages into the California desert. (“It sounds funny, because everyone does that, but there’s a reason why everyone does that,” he says.) While listening to a podcast by Joe Rogan, the erudite comedian and mixed-martial-arts announcer, he discovered Wim Hof, a Dutch wellness coach who is sometimes called the Iceman, because he trains disciples to withstand freezing temperatures by regulating their bodies, using a technique that entails induced hyperventilation. Hopkins says that making electronic

music is more physically demanding than it looks—all those years spent crouched over his laptop had damaged his back. As his body got stronger and his mind got calmer, Hopkins started to think anew about what kind of music he wanted to make. Some early demos had been heavy and distorted, reflecting his anxiety about the state of the world. Now he was less interested in evoking that anxiety than in finding a way to leave it behind. The acid-house scene that Hopkins loved was associated with a druggy, wide-eyed spirituality; this tradition is easy to mock, but Hopkins found compelling ways to revive it, without apology and without irony. The centerpiece of “Singularity” is “Everything Connected,” a grand techno track that lasts more than ten minutes, building and disintegrating and eventually giving way to “Feel First Life,” a wordless choral postlude that sounds distinctly devotional.

Hopkins works hard to make his music sound simple. In composing “Singularity,” he switched software, from Logic to Ableton, which gives him even more fine-grained control over timbre, and a single song might often contain more than a hundred individual tracks, carefully mixed to create an illusion of emptiness. (When he performs live, Hopkins uses devices called Kaoss Pads, which let him trigger sounds and effects by tapping and rubbing a series of screens; he moves his fingers with the delicacy of a concert pianist.) Although dance music is built on repetition, he finds ways to make sure that listeners don’t feel as if they were being pummelled by machines. The most infectious beats on “Immunity” are slightly but insistently asymmetrical—he made the rhythms more human by hobbling them a bit. And “Singularity” is full of familiar-sounding chord progressions arranged in irregular patterns, so that you are never quite sure when the next change is coming. You can relax into these tracks without ever feeling that you have them figured out.

A generation ago, part of the appeal of electronic music was its mysteriousness; Hopkins was far from the only young listener intrigued by hard-to-find records, made by faceless pro-

ducers using obscure technology. Nowadays, streaming services make it easier than ever to consume music: one track at a time, or in never-ending playlists. Hopkins’s work is accessible enough to be used in a variety of ways, which means that many people hear it without seeking it out. On Spotify, it is regularly featured on popular playlists such as “Music for Concentration” and “Sleep,” mixed in with compositions by avant-garde heroes, like Aphex Twin, and intentionally generic tracks that seem to exist only on Spotify—the musical equivalent of super-market brands.

Many of the most thrilling current producers—from Daniel Lopatin, who records as Oneohtrix Point Never, to the emerging London-based composer known as Klein—make music that echoes the queasy, twitchy sensation of life online. By comparison, Hopkins’s version of minimalism marks him as a classicist, whose musical experiments often find elegant ways to update the old templates of house and techno. And when it comes to musical consumption Hopkins is even more old-fashioned: he likes to make hour-long albums, reasoning that there will always be some people who can be compelled to listen to them straight through.

The tracks on “Singularity” flow into each other, as a reward for anyone who takes the trouble to play them in order. The second half consists mainly of textures and melodies, not rhythms, as if Hopkins were giving casual listeners permission to space out, or to forget about him altogether. Then, near the end, comes “Luminous Beings,” which is a dance track but a placid one. It whirrs and clicks for a minute before the beat arrives, and then some broken chords, which are precisely layered to create an ever-changing cadence. The mood is artfully ambiguous. Some listeners might imagine glowing lights above a dance floor, near closing time. Others might picture the pattern created by morning sun, beaming through a window onto a bedroom floor. Still others might picture nothing at all, having found a different way to pay tribute to the soft power of Hopkins’s creations: by drifting off to sleep. ♦

MANSPPLAINING

Class, colonialism, and self-creation in “My Fair Lady.”

BY HILTON ALS



“The Street Where I Live,” the playwright and lyricist Alan Jay Lerner’s amusing 1978 memoir, is full of anecdotes about the process by which Lerner and his professional partner, the composer Frederick Loewe, created eight blockbuster musicals together, including the 1956 hit “My Fair Lady” (in revival at Lincoln Center Theatre’s Vivian Beaumont, directed by Bartlett Sher). The year was 1952, and Lerner, then thirty-three, was in Hollywood, working on a screen adaptation of “Brigadoon,” his and Loewe’s very successful 1947 musical. One day, he received a call from a producer named Gabriel Pascal, who had acquired the rights to George Bernard Shaw’s 1913 play “Pygmalion” and thought that Lerner and Loewe could turn the

comedy about class and sexism into a musical. He wasn’t wrong. In their collaborations, Lerner and Loewe were adept at marrying realism and fantasy, and what was Shaw’s play but an examination of the reality of one man’s fantasy of remaking a woman in his own image?

Still, the assignment proved to be a headache for the duo. First, they abandoned the project for a time, while Lerner worked with another composer. Then, in 1954, Pascal died, and the rights to the play were transferred to his bank. Once Lerner and Loewe finally started on the show, they spent many hours—days, weeks, years—trying to figure out how to combine their talents with Shaw’s. It wasn’t until they hit on the idea of following the excellent 1938 movie adapta-

tion, rather than the play, that they got cooking. In Shaw’s play, there were too many entrances and exits, musings and changes of mind. In the film, and thus in the musical, the lines between men and women, privilege and class degradation, humor and drama are more clearly drawn. Part of the pleasure of watching this staging—and it is a pleasure, if not entirely satisfying, but then what is?—is observing not how Eliza (Lauren Ambrose) becomes more herself as the show goes on but how she learns to express that self, strong, indomitable, softened by dreams and wishes, in the language of the class that helps her cross over.

Colonialism works in many ways. We don’t know how long Eliza has been a Covent Garden flower seller when we meet her, but those filthy cobblestones and the close, damp air have become part of her being. She’s on her own, though she has a father, Alfred P. Doolittle (Norbert Leo Butz), a loafer and a drinker who hits her up for cash when he runs into her. Eliza doesn’t have class aspirations—at first—but she does have comfort aspirations, which are tied to her desire to do better for herself. She sings:

All I want is a room somewhere,
Far away from the cold night air;
With one enormous chair . . .
Someone’s head restin’ on my knee,
Warm and tender as he can be,
Who takes good care of me . . .
Oh, wouldn’t it be lovely?

Her dream of a supportive lover sets her apart from her fellow denizens of Covent Garden, where the cycle of poverty is inextricable from the cycle of abuse. But although she doesn’t think of the scholar Henry Higgins (Harry Hadden-Paton) as a brute, he quickly reveals himself to be as insensitive to her plight as he is to that of any human, let alone a woman from an impoverished background, who can’t advance his career as a phoneticist. That’s how Higgins and Eliza meet: as she admonishes someone for knocking her over and ruining her flowers, he copies down her Cockney speech. When she is told that a man is standing behind a column writing down everything she says, she fires off a fusillade of verbal abuse at Higgins, who all but ignores her once he discovers that a man buying flowers is a linguist he wants to meet, Colonel Pickering (Allan Corduner). Irritated by Eliza and eager to

talk to Pickering, Higgins tosses some coins into her basket and moves on.

That money is the start of a changed life. To watch Ambrose's Eliza during this scene is to see a real actress at work. Her eyes fill with tears as she counts the coins, and you can see the trouble fall away from her: her life will be different now that she has the means to will it so. Her dream? To be a lady in a flower shop. But she knows how England works: to have the part, you must speak the part. Tracking Higgins down at home, she offers herself up as a paying customer. It never occurs to her that she might be rejected. And she isn't: Higgins decides to reshape her into his ideal view of his language—precise, descriptive, pure.

For the rest of the show, Higgins carries out his experiment, while Eliza runs through a variety of feelings—fatigue, love, disillusionment—before finally becoming again the independent woman she always was. Some of their exchanges are comical, others not. The most layered are those in which we see Eliza uneasily trying to fit into Higgins's vision of a proper English voice and body—and then exploding it. At Ascot, near the end of the first act, Higgins introduces her to his mother, Mrs. Higgins (Diana Rigg), who, as it happens, is friends with Freddy Eynsford-Hill (Jordan Donica), the young man who knocked Eliza over when she was a flower seller. Now she's in polite society, but, no matter how hard she tries to remember Higgins's lessons on language and deportment, she can't quite pull them off. Weirdly, when I saw the show, this was the only scene where I felt that Ambrose, ordinarily so full of life and imagination, lacked truthfulness: she used shtick to get through it, and the laughs piled up, but what stayed with me was the honesty of her tears when Freddy crushed her violets, and when she sang—in a beautiful, if limited, soprano—about wanting to dance all night.

Sher, working with the wonderful scenic designer Michael Yeargan and the choreographer Christopher Gattelli, makes a show, in this scene, of upper-class English repression. (Much of the musical relies on things that Americans still judge and mock, hundreds of years after the Mayflower landed: uptight English social stratifications.) It took me a while

to understand what Sher was doing, which, it turns out, was what he was also doing three years ago, when he staged "The King and I": trying to make these historical musicals matter to a twenty-first-century audience, whose concerns are different from those of the original audiences. (Sometimes, Sher goes a little crazy making the contemporary point. In "Get Me to the Church on Time," for instance, he has chorus boys in veils and little else doing high kicks.)

At first, I was disturbed by Hadden-Paton's portrayal, fearing it tipped too much into movie villainy. But class and self-absorption have sealed his Higgins off in ways that feel real: he is empire and has been reared to think of himself as such. Americans have always been able to identify with Eliza's Horatio Alger narrative of self-creation, but the priggish Higgins stands at a distance from our affections. He doesn't satisfy the audience's need to believe, for instance, that love can be transformative. When he finally admits to feeling affection for Eliza—or, at least, jealousy of Freddy, who adores her—it's more of a philosophical construct than an emotion, and it does nothing to free him from his snobbery:

I've grown accustomed to her face!
She almost makes the day begin. . . .
Marry Freddy! What an infantile ideal!
What a heartless, wicked, brainless thing to do! . . .
I can see her now: Mrs. Freddy Eynsford-Hill,
In a wretched little flat above a store.
I can see her now: not a penny in the till,
And a bill-collector beating at the door. . . .
In a year or so, when she's prematurely gray, . . .
She'll come home and lo!
He'll have upped and run away
With a social climbing heiress from New York!

Higgins's revenge fantasies are triggered by his sense of vulnerability, of course, but they're also his way of holding on to empire and its contempt for the New World. It can seem as though Hadden-Paton is overplaying Higgins's snottiness, until you remember meeting any number of people like him, who frighten you with their chill while they try to draw you in with their smarts. Ambrose's Eliza, on the other hand, hurts us in the best possible way, when we realize too late, just as she does, that her love for Higgins amounts to a confusion between the construction of speech and the true language of feeling. ♦



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GUILT BY ASSOCIATION

"This Is Our Land" and "Le Corbeau."

BY ANTHONY LANE

The heroine of "This Is Our Land," Pauline Duhez (Émilie Dequenne), doesn't want to be a heroine of anything. That is both her problem and her strength. She is a visiting nurse in the northern French town of Hénart, popular with her patients and admired in the community. She is also a single mother, with two children to look after,

of collective worship. She herself is standing for office in Hénart, and, by way of backup, she needs someone to run as mayor—a local candidate, scandal-free, and already familiar with the area. That is where Pauline comes in.

As coded movies go, "This Is Our Land," which is directed by Lucas Belvaux, is not difficult to crack. The

spilled on this soil, for the sake of freedom and of France: a sacrifice that is ripe for the cultivation of political myth.

Pauline is unschooled in such grandeur. She is more concerned with cooking healthy meals for her father, to stop him from subsisting on sausages and beer. ("I'll croak how I want," he says.) One evening, she dines alone with Berthier (André Dussollier), a respected doctor, who, over many years, has lent a gleam of that respect to the intolerant right. Richer and smoother than Pauline, he opens a good bottle of Bordeaux, waits until the end of the meal, and then makes his pitch, proposing her as the ideal mayor of Hénart. "You're mad," she replies, but he urges her to make a change—"to bring jobs here instead of countries where they exploit kids as old as yours." Note the skill with which Berthier deploys the personal touch: "You don't fight for ideas but for your loved ones. There's nothing ideological about it." So speaks the consummate ideologue.

The trouble is that Berthier is the most interesting person onscreen, not least because Dussollier, who, in his long career, has made films with François Truffaut, Éric Rohmer, and Alain Resnais, is so effortlessly engaging. We feel wooed and warmed by his gentlemanly manner, even as Berthier's beliefs are revealed in their malignant chill. The movie drifts toward him, as if coaxed by his charm, and also toward Stéphane Stankowiak (Guillaume Gouix), an altogether less alluring soul. Normally referred to as Stanko, he is a boyfriend from Pauline's school days, who falls for her anew—a surprise to us and a glitch for the R.N.P., since Stanko used to do its dirty work on the quiet. He was an active neo-Nazi, and his idea of a big night out, even now, is to dress up in commando gear, waylay immigrants, and imprison them in a cage. Pauline suspects nothing, despite the large tattoo across his shoulder blades, which appears to be a fascistic hybrid of tarantula and bat.

And what of the perils of Pauline? Well, she is coached and groomed: her hair is lightened, and she is presented to the public at a press conference, during which she smiles and says not a word. Beside her, Dorgelle does the talking. The platform on which Pauline will campaign is devised without her input, and, when she objects, Berthier shrugs.



In Lucas Belvaux's film, a far-right party fields an unlikely candidate.

and an ailing father, Jacques (Patrick Descamps), who used to be a hard-line union man. Her days are full of duties, and she fulfills them all. As for politics, Pauline never votes. "It's no use," she says. Like everyone, she has grievances and gripes, but nothing rancorous, and, besides, why make a fuss?

Enter the R.N.P., or Renewed Nation Party, a freshly forged (and fictitious) political force. The shrewd boast of the R.N.P. is that it will reach over the heads of a tattered establishment and appeal to those who, in the mind of the Party, represent the authentic France. Dominating the movement, like the carved figure on the prow of a warship, is Agnès Dorgelle (Catherine Jacob), whose rallies amount to an act

R.N.P. is akin to the National Front, whose leader, Marine Le Pen, is less foursquare but no less formidable than Dorgelle; both women sport a blond bob that could be designated as an offensive weapon. Hénart doesn't exist, but, with its surrounding slag heaps, it suggests Hénin-Beaumont, a former mining town where the National Front has been in power since 2014. The film's original title was "Chez Nous," raising the spectre, invaluable to the extreme right, of a home from which intruders must be barred. One of the earliest images is of a tractor, plowing through dark loam and unearthing an artillery shell, presumably from the killing fields of the First World War. Nothing is said, but we are reminded that blood was

"It's just advertising," he says. "No one reads it." In short, she is little more than a face, brought in to soften the look of the R.N.P., and Belvaux wants us to share her umbrage at this affront; but how sustained, really, is the attention that his movie pays to her plight? Not only is she rejected by her Muslim patients and scorned by her father (although many old militants like him, in depressed industrial regions, have turned to the National Front) but her own dramatic presence dwindles and fades. Around her, the movie loses focus, and, as for the climax, my best guess is that Belvaux and his pals had a game of Consequences, with the aid of a few beers, to see who could dream up the silliest ending, and then went with that.

We are left to rue "This Is Our Land" as an opportunity missed, and to wonder how else the tale could have been told. The parable of the innocent candidate, who is hired as a patsy in the political ruckus and turns out, annoyingly, to possess a conscience, is a cinematic staple. In "The Great McGinty" (1940), Preston Sturges introduced a bum who happily casts his vote in thirty-seven different precincts, for two bucks a pop, before becoming first a cog and then a wrench in the political works. In Frank Capra's "Meet John Doe" (1941), another bum—Gary Cooper, if you please—pretends, again for a reward, to be the author of fake newspaper articles lambasting the genuine ills of society, and flinches at the fame that ensues. (A remake, set amid social media, might hit a nerve just now.) Both films are fun to watch and disturbing to contemplate. They are giddily convinced that, as one

of Capra's hobos says, "the world's been shaved by a drunken barber," and uncertain whether the American public should be relied upon as a trusty moral arbiter or feared as a swayable mass. Belvaux's movie, by contrast, is a sparse and solemn affair. We meet the controllers of the political machine, but, aside from one skirmish in a housing project, the wider effects of their scheming remain invisible. If the land belongs to the people, where did all the people go?

Another time, another place, but the same toxins coursing through similar veins. Welcome to the sick but bracing world of "Le Corbeau" (1943). Henri-Georges Clouzot's unforgettable movie, set in an unnamed provincial town, and made in France during the German Occupation, is now being screened at Film Forum. The print has been tenderly restored; the jolt of the story is intact.

Comparisons with "This Is Our Land" are inevitable. Instead of Pauline the nurse, we have a dapper doctor, Rémy Germain (Pierre Fresnay). He is first seen washing his hands, like Pontius Pilate; a mother in his care has given birth, though her child has not survived. Soon, in common with other townsfolk, he receives an anonymous and spiteful note, whose writer claims to see everything that goes on. (In French, the phrase used is "*J'ai l'œil américain*," which literally means "I have an American eye.") Over two months, more than eight hundred letters are sent, accusing the recipients of sundry sins. Worse still, each letter contains a worm of truth. The movie squirms with mistrust, and burrows deep. So, who is the culprit? A solution is

eventually provided, yet it settles nothing, for almost everyone we meet seems capable of filling a pen with poison. Guilt, like the unforgiving sunlight, falls on young and old alike.

One cannot predict how quickly films will date. "This Is Our Land," for instance, which came out in France less than three months before last year's Presidential election, bristling with topicality, was soon overtaken by events. Although a new political party, born of an impatience with the existing order, *did* emerge victorious, it sprang not from the far right but from the center; and it was not Marine Le Pen but Emmanuel Macron who wound up in the Élysée Palace. "Le Corbeau," on the other hand, is a hellbrew that has lost not a fraction of its flavor, and it feels all too pertinent to the age of trolls. Bitter and swift, the film allows itself a strain of acid humor that Belvaux might deem inappropriate but that Sturges or Capra—and Billy Wilder, for sure—would sneakily relish.

Upon its release, "Le Corbeau" discomfited both the left and the right. It was denounced by the Catholic Church and banned after the Liberation; Clouzot had shown, with mortifying clarity, how ordinary people could behave when given the chance to finger their fellow-citizens—and, in the process, to assuage their own lurking shame. His most fêted works, "The Wages of Fear" (1953) and "Les Diaboliques" (1955), lay in the future, but his loveless commandment was already carved in stone: Thou shalt hate thy neighbor as thyself. ♦

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VOLUME XCIV, NO. 11, April 30, 2018. THE NEW YORKER (ISSN 0028792X) is published weekly (except for five combined issues: February 12 & 19, June 4 & 11, July 9 & 16, August 6 & 13, and December 24 & 31) by Condé Nast, which is a division of Advance Magazine Publishers Inc. PRINCIPAL OFFICE: Condé Nast, 1 World Trade Center, New York, NY 10007. Chris Mitchell, chief business officer; Risa Aronson, vice-president, revenue; James Guilfoyle, executive director of finance and business operations; Fabio Bertoni, general counsel. Condé Nast: Robert A. Sauerberg, Jr., president & chief executive officer; David E. Geithner, chief financial officer; Pamela Drucker Mann, chief revenue and marketing officer. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canadian Goods and Services Tax Registration No. 123242885-RT0001.

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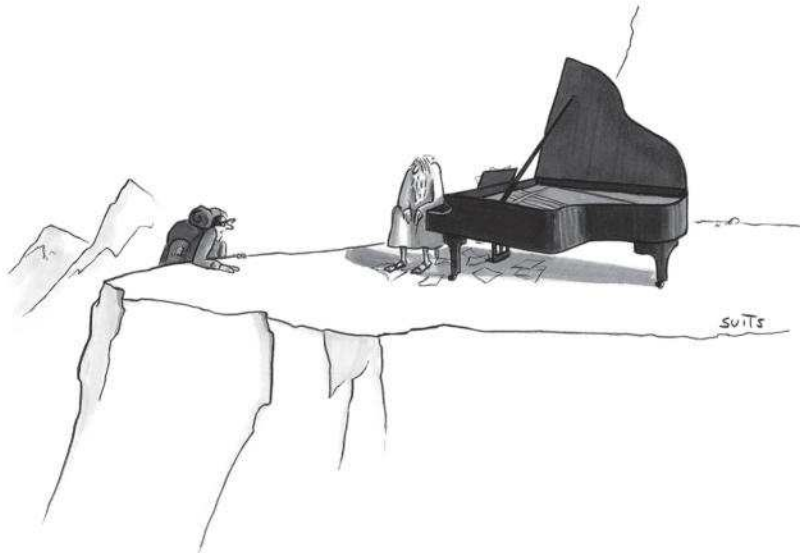
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CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Julia Suits, must be received by Sunday, April 29th. The finalists in the April 16th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the May 14th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“

”

THE FINALISTS



“It’s a textbook case—depending on which state your textbooks are from.”

Michael Boring, Brooklyn, N.Y.

“They say all the victims were related.”

P. Leith Merritt, Rochester, N.Y.

“I suspect some people will deny this ever happened.”

Jonathan Guinegagne, Brooklyn, N.Y.

THE WINNING CAPTION



“Bad news. They found the proof in the pudding.”

Grant Johnson, Louisville, Ky.

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